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THE NEW YORKER

MAY 29, 2023



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THE NEW YORKER

MAY 29, 2023

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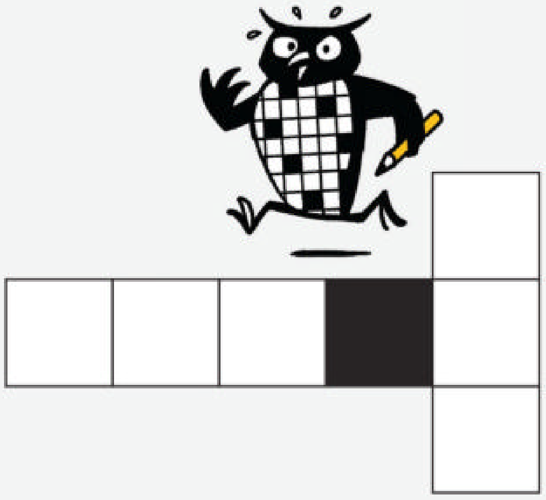
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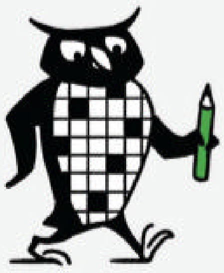
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Marcellus Hall "Open House"

DRAWINGS *Elisabeth McNair, Frank Cotham, Ellis Rosen, Sofia Warren, Carolita Johnson, Hilary Fitzgerald Campbell, Joe Dator, Adam Cooper and Mat Barton, Benjamin Schwartz, Liana Finck, Emily Bernstein, Zachary Kanin, John McNamee, Edward Steed, Matthew Diffee, Amy Kurzweil* SPOTS *Elisha Cooper*

THE NEW YORKER CROSSWORD

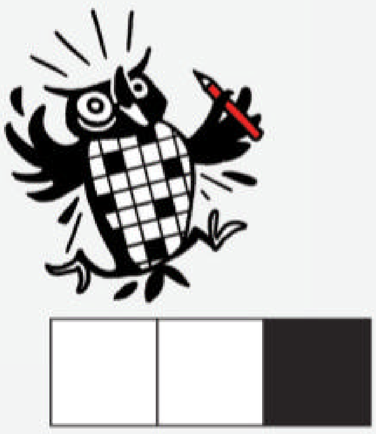




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Luke Mogelson (*"Underworld," p. 28*) won a National Magazine Award and the inaugural Schanberg Prize for his coverage of the Capitol insurrection. He published "The Storm Is Here" in 2022.

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Dorothy Wickenden (*"American Flavor," p. 16*) is a staff writer. Her book "The Agitators: Three Friends Who Fought for Abolition and Women's Rights" came out in 2021.

Marcellus Hall (*Cover*) is a musician and an illustrator. He is at work on an indie-rock graphic memoir and an LP.

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Julia Halperin (*The Talk of the Town, p. 14*) is a co-founder of the Burns Halperin Report and the former executive editor of Artnet News.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



PAGE-TURNER
Rachael Bedard reviews "Who Would Believe a Prisoner?," a book by a group of incarcerated women in Indiana.



ESSAY
Alan Shayne on being upstaged by Marlon Brando, in an excerpt from "The Star Dressing Room."

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LEFT: MICHELLE MILDENBERG; RIGHT: CECIL BEATON

THE MAIL

LINGUISTIC CONNECTION

Carina Chocano, in her piece about Duolingo's founder, Luis von Ahn, notes that many people use the app instead of indulging in social media or television ("The Language Game," April 24th & May 1st). I began much the same way, using Duolingo as a distraction from less enriching pursuits, but I have subsequently become a devoted user. My current Duolingo streak is more than two thousand days.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I used the Duolingo Classes tool to host a free French-film club, whose members would gather on Zoom every two weeks to discuss a preselected film in intermediate French. The club was open to the public, and new people joined every session, but a core group of regulars emerged. We continued until the end of 2022, when Duolingo announced that it would be closing down the Classes feature. It seems that von Ahn is interested in replacing human teachers (a role that I filled as a volunteer) with A.I. in order to reduce costs and increase efficiency. I understand why von Ahn places so much emphasis on the boost to a person's earning power that a facility with English can provide, and why he prioritizes cheap education. Still, it saddens me to see language learning reduced solely to an economic tool. Doing so ignores the reasons that so many people choose to learn another language: curiosity about a different culture, an appreciation for certain art forms, and a desire to connect with people whom you might otherwise never meet.

Anna Fitzpatrick
Toronto, Ont.

TENDING THE GARDEN

Alex Abramovich traces many of the Schraderverse's patterns in his Profile of Paul Schrader ("The Man in the Room," May 8th). These include the influence of Robert Bresson, the exploration of whether man can escape preordained destiny, and the relationship between redemption and purity—themes that inform an interview Schrader did for "ReFocus: The Films of Paul Schrader," a book that I co-edited. The main imagery of Schrader's latest film, "Master Gardener," though, is worth perhaps more consideration. If plants are pruned correctly, then the energy can go to the flowers; neurobiology has likewise revealed how the brain prunes itself as we age. I can't help but see this process as a metaphor for where Schrader now stands in relation to his life and his filmmaking. "Master Gardener," the final film in a trilogy, shows him to be pruning back the narratives and ideas that have fuelled his career for more than four decades, in order to spark healing and redemption. It is not surprising that these films are among the very best of his career.

Michelle E. Moore
River Forest, Ill.

HOLY FOODS

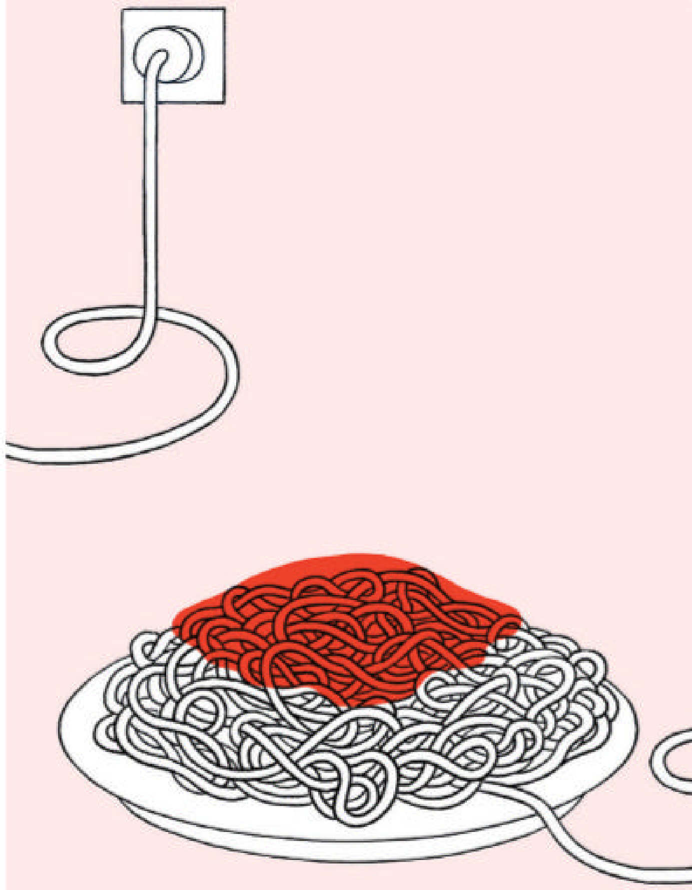
Seeing Edward Koren's drawing gave me hope that people have come to understand organic farming as simply following nature's ways (Sketchbook, May 8th). When I was an editor at *Organic Gardening* magazine, in the seventies, I was not prepared for the vituperation that was heaped upon the writers and editors who put out *O.G.*, as we called it. According to the media at the time, we were crazies, akin to tinfoil-hat alchemists. Instead, Koren gave organic farming's practitioners and products glowing, winged halos. That seems perfectly justified to me. Organic farming improves the land it is practiced on. Its produce is not treated with conventional agriculture's toxins. I have seen, in my own gardens during the past fifty-one years, life thrive and flourish in so many forms. It's like we're one big happy family, just as Koren pictured.

Jeff Cox
Kenwood, Calif.

•

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MAY 24 – 30, 2023

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



Pickleball mania reaches a fever pitch with **CityPickle,** in Central Park's Wollman Rink, where fourteen newly installed courts welcome amateurs and professionals alike. The tennis-adjacent game—in which two or four players volley a plastic Whiffle-like ball with paddles—has become increasingly popular in recent years, owing to its high ratio of ease to enjoyment; at the Park, through Oct. 9, pickleballers can reserve clinics, private lessons, and open play on the courts from 7 A.M. to 9 P.M. daily, via city-pickle.com.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CAROLINE TOMPKINS

As ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

ART

Jesse Duquette

Instagram's "most shadow-banned cartoonist," Duquette first garnered attention for his comic-a-day project "The Daily Don," which skewered the Trump Administration. In this exhibition, "Cryptids & Creepshows," the New York artist exhibits fifty-two drawings of monstrosities both political and mythical. One wall of the gallery features satirical scenes starring fiends of the right wing: Reagan and Trump proudly high-fiving over the AIDS and coronavirus epidemics; Mitch McConnell devouring Lady Liberty, in the style of Goya's Saturn; Marjorie Taylor Green living her truth, her head a Ku Klux Klan hood atop a steaming whorl of poo. On the opposite wall hang illustrations of bizarro creatures that Duquette found in far-flung bestiaries, such as the fiery-haired Welsh giant Gogmagog; the one-eyed, two-stomached Amazonian Mapinguari; and the Japanese Okubi, a female head composed of vengeful souls. Excoriation is Duquette's mode of vengeance—and of catharsis. Don't be surprised if you find yourself giggling, even as you recoil from the horror of it all.—*Jennifer Krasinski (BravinLee Programs; through June 8.)*

Jaune Quick-to-See Smith

Breaking the path to an American art we've long needed to see, Smith is both a force for reckoning and a force to be reckoned with. A citizen of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, the eighty-three-year-old activist and artist has devoted herself to righting the story of the Native experience, foregrounding the genocide and ecological decimation that malformed the roots of our nation. Among the hundred and thirty works on view in this glorious retrospective at the Whitney is "Urban Trickster," from 2021, a cast-bronze head of a grinning coyote: both a mythical healer and a cosmically comical figure, not unlike Smith herself. Her sculptures, paintings, and works on paper deliver doses of rage and wit in equal measure. At times, Smith takes direct aim at titans of Western culture, Pablo Picasso and Walt Disney among them, as icons complicate other icons: images of buffalo, horses, and canoes face off against those of the grieving mother from "Guernica," the Lone Ranger, and Snow White. Smith's collaging of newspapers and plastic bottles may be inspired by Pop art, but, as she has noted, Indigenous people have always made sacred objects from the materials at hand. In "Fifty Shades of Brown," from 2017-18 (one of several riffs in the show on Jasper Johns's famous maps), Smith names each of the states after the color she used to paint it—Walnut, Cocoa, Buckskin, Bronze, and others—a playful yet pointed portrait of our country's true colors.—*J.K. (Whitney Museum; through Aug. 13.)*

MUSIC

Jakob Bro & Joe Lovano

JAZZ The late drummer Paul Motian had a ball reconfiguring the atypical instrumentation of his bands—doubling up on guitarists and bassists, or even jettisoning the bass altogether. On "Once Around the Room," a Motian tribute project released in 2022, the saxophonist Joe Lovano and the guitarist Jakob Bro keep the tradition alive by uniting the bassists Thomas Morgan and Larry Grenadier (both acoustic) and Anders Christensen (electric)—all, like Bro and Lovano, former Motian collaborators—plus the drummers Joey Baron and Jorge Rossy. The album's swirling sonic landscape provides space for both Lovano's garrulousness and Bro's minimalism; the bassists and drummers mesh while maintaining respectful distance from one another. The result is a prototypically roomy ECM recording that calls to mind its hero while impressing with its own distinct character. Motian, always game for the individual and the unpredictable, would have approved. The group reunites at what was the revered drummer's New York home base.—*Steve Futterman (Village Vanguard; May 24-28.)*

Hailu Mergia

AFRO-POP The Ethiopian keyboardist and accordionist Hailu Mergia was a prime mover in the music scene of nineteen-seventies Addis Ababa, where he led the groovy Walias Band. But when the group toured the States, in 1981, Mergia opted to dodge the dictatorship back home and stick around Washington, D.C., where he settled as cabdriver. It's not uncommon to enter a taxi and hear alluring songs from the driver's homeland; Mergia's was the rare car where

AT THE GALLERIES



COURTESY THE ARTIST / DC MOORE GALLERY

Since the late nineteen-seventies, the name **Yvonne Jacquette** has been synonymous with aerial landscapes: cities twinkling at night or patchwork rural expanses, seen from the high floors of skyscrapers or from low-flying planes. These paintings (and drawings and prints) are vibrant but distant, expressing their love of the unpredictable world with equanimity. Call the images realist if you insist, but their intricate patterns tilt toward abstraction, a reminder that paintbrushes aren't cameras. Two wonderful shows at the DC Moore gallery (on view through June 10) present very early and very late works by the American artist, who died in April, at the age of eighty-eight. Instead of airborne perspectives, the show surprises with domestic vantage points, whether it's a Maine meadow framed by floral curtains, from 1964, or the back of a billboard seen through the window of Jacquette's Manhattan studio, from 2020. "Barn Ceiling" (above), from 1969, is a luminous, nearly seven-foot-tall interior that's also a rigorous study in stripes (and, maybe, a post-and-beam riposte to Minimalism, then in its heyday). Jacquette planned the exhibitions in recent months with her son (and fellow-painter), Tom Burckhardt. One of the shows' most touching moments is a rare still-life, from 2020—film cannisters stored on shelves, their stacks suggesting miniature towers—that also reads as a portrait of Jacquette's late husband, the Swiss filmmaker and photographer Rudy Burckhardt.—*Andrea K. Scott*

CLASSICAL



Inspiration struck **Joseph Alessi,** the New York Philharmonic's principal trombonist, when he heard the pianist Makoto Ozone and the vibraphonist Gary Burton perform Chick Corea's "Brasilia" at Birdland, the midtown jazz club, in 2017. "Something came over me," Alessi recently recalled. "I just love the music so much." He asked Ozone, who also had performed with the Philharmonic, to broker an introduction to Corea to discuss a commission. The resulting Trombone Concerto—which Alessi describes as a fusion of Latin rhythms and the impressionism of Erik Satie—became the last piece Corea completed before he died, in 2021; now the Philharmonic gives its U.S. première, at David Geffen Hall (May 25-27). Originally, each movement ended quietly, so Alessi summoned the courage to ask Corea for a new finale. Now a balmy tango flows into a fistful of dangerously high F-sharps on the last page. "Be careful what you wish for," Alessi said.—*Oussama Zahr*

the driver was actually playing—between fares, he staved off loneliness by busting out his keyboard. "Nobody knew I was practicing," Mergia explains in "It Is a Soul," a short biographical documentary. "Some people thought I had forgotten how to play." The taxi sessions served him well. A decade ago, the crate-digging label Awesome Tapes from Africa reignited interest in Mergia, first through reissues and then with fresh material. His work, both old and new, pulsates with a muted glow that feels inscrutable, gentle, and funky.—*Jay Ruttenberg (Elsewhere; May 30.)*

redveil

HIP-HOP Perhaps the Maryland rapper redveil was destined to be a wunderkind. In a genre known for producing prodigies, he is among the most promising prospects, a teen-ager who writes and produces music that shows he's aware of rap history but not beholden to it. Inspired by other artists who emerged in their teens—particularly the Odd Future standouts Tyler, the Creator and Earl Sweatshirt—redveil taught himself to record on his computer at eleven. By sixteen, he'd already independently released two projects, leading to his breakthrough, "learn 2 swim," which came out last year, on his eighteenth birthday. The album married a woozy, sing-song style with a keen ear for soulful sampling, tracking his personal development through his enlightened songs. His recent EP, "playing w/ fire," is at once belligerent and carefree, embodying the recklessness of youth.—*Sheldon Pearce (Music Hall of Williamsburg; May 24.)*

Soul Glo

PUNK Amid the ever-changing character of the East Village, a constant remains: the omnipresent punks who descend onto Tompkins Square Park for free matinée hardcore shows, a lasting tradition in the neighborhood where New York hardcore took shape four decades ago. Rarely are the billings as vibrant as this lineup, which features local bands, such as Compa and Persona, representing the diverse emerging generation of New York punks, as well as the Philadelphia trio Soul Glo, which broke through with its latest album, "Diaspora Problems," in 2022. That blazing record mixes ferocious riffs, forbidding breakdowns, and astute lyrical testaments to Black life with elements of screamo and rap—as on the track "Driponomics," which references streetwear clothing brands and the savvy young people who flip their products. This daylight gig, which also includes T.A.Z., No Knock, and DJ Libby Leola, serves as a clothing and hygiene-supply drive for Friend of a Friend, a local organization that supports unhoused New Yorkers.—*Jenn Pelly (Tompkins Square Park; May 26.)*

Surgeon

TECHNO Few performers are as synonymous with their genre as the British d.j. and producer Surgeon is with techno. In the late nineties, Surgeon (born Anthony Child) was a resident d.j. at the Berlin club Tresor, and his recordings for the club's namesake record label defined that era of techno: defiantly machine-oriented, minimalistic bordering on pointillistic, and in-your-face hard. But Surgeon's incisive style has kept pace with the broader changes in the techno palate—look no further than his recent episode of BBC Radio 1's "Essential Mix," which offers an expansive introduction to the style while still staying true to techno's grit.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Basement; May 26.)*

DANCE

New York City Ballet

The last days of the spring season are like a summary of everything that came before. Early in the week, Justin Peck's "Copland Dance Episodes," an evening-long ballet that creates a kind of dance utopia set to the music of Aaron Copland, receives its last two performances (May 24-25). Balanchine's one-act précis of "Swan Lake"—brilliant but a little cold—splits a bill with Alexei Ratmansky's imagistic and mysterious "Pictures at an Exhibition" (May 26 and May 28). On May 27 (matinée and evening), the program combines two Jerome Robbins works—his first, "Fancy Free," and his last, "Brandenburg"—with Balanchine's angular, modernist "Agon," from 1957.—*Marina Harss (David H. Koch Theatre; through May 28.)*

DanceAfrica

This year, Brooklyn Academy of Music's annual festival turns its focus to Ghana, and returns to its pre-pandemic practice of inviting a major dance troupe from Africa. Ghana's National Dance Company is a venerable one, founded in the post-colonial pride of 1962. Its program matches such traditional forms as the courtly drum-and-dance style *kete* with a more contemporary section, set in a club atmosphere and accompanied by the highlife of Arkestra Africa and the vocalist Amma Whatt.—*Brian Seibert (Howard Gilman Opera House; May 26-29.)*

Dada Masilo

The South African choreographer Dada Masilo has built a career out of remaking such ballet staples as "Swan Lake" and "Giselle," mixing in African dance, updated politics,

ILLUSTRATION BY LIA LIAO

and new music. Now comes "The Sacrifice," her take on "The Rite of Spring." Masilo ditches the Stravinsky score for an original one of percussion and operatic vocals, played live, and she twists the scenario of a sacrificial victim (her quick-moving self) into a gentler, more consoling tale, rooted in the rhythms and the communal joy of Tswana dance.—*B.S. (Joyce Theatre; May 23-28.)*

Anna Sperber

After a few years of presenting work outdoors, Sperber comes back inside for "Amplifier." It's a group piece: the choreographer and four other female performers amplify one another, trying to create and ride a collective momentum that accesses the power and aggression that have driven Sperber's best work. A score by Nate Wooley assists with alternating clamor and silence.—*B.S. (Roulette; May 23-25.)*

THE THEATRE

Fat Ham

This play, by James Ijames, which won last year's Pulitzer Prize for drama, transfers to Broadway from the Public. It's a sometimes faithful, sometimes dizzyingly disruptive riff on Shakespeare's "Hamlet," with Juicy (Marcel Spears) as that excruciatingly ambivalent mourner, quick of wit but slow to act. Juicy is a Black working-class American, living in North Carolina, trying to find, and to rescue, a gentler take on masculinity amid the admonishments of a macho-acting father. Juicy's dead dad, Pap (Billy Eugene Jones), visits Juicy as a ghost demanding vengeance: the man who shanked him in prison was deputized by Pap's brother, Rev (also played by Jones). Both men were expert barbecuers; now Pap wants Juicy to flay his uncle Rev like a hog. But Juicy's not interested in barbecue or in revenge—he aspires to love instead of war. Spears, a heart-first performer, makes Juicy's moments of anguish rhyme with his shady asides, pointing out how both flow from a deep deposit of frustrated affection for the sensual world, and a hope for a life of his own making. With a fresh and vital force, Ijames and Juicy make the Hamlet saga more comedy than tragedy, taking a tortured story of father influence and turning it into a kind of party.—*Vinson Cunningham (American Airlines Theatre; through June 25.)*

The Fears

Tuesday evening. Seven New Yorkers have retreated from the daily bustle to come together at a Buddhist center. Their leader pings a meditation bowl, and they close their eyes, taking in the silen— "Fuck yourself!" a man roars somewhere outside, between blasts of jackhammering. The pursuit of inner peace in a big, surly city is comedy gold, as the playwright Emma Sheanshang recognizes. But, as she ventures beyond satire into sexual abuse and other non-laughing matters, the jokes sit uneasily with the trauma. So does the audience. The discomfort is partly a product of the realism of Dan Algrant's staging, and of the ensemble's emotivity. If anything in this world-première production, presented by Steven Soderbergh, achieves an equilibrium between humor and harshness, it's Jane Shaw's pitch-perfect sound desi— "Take a stroll under a fucking bus!"—*Dan Stahl (Pershing Square Signature Center; through July 9.)*

Romeo and Juliet

Hansol Jung and Dustin Wills, the playwright-and-director duo behind the poignant "Wolf Play," have reteamed for a "modern verse translation" of Shakespeare's star-crossed romance (presented by the National Asian American Theatre Company and Two River Theatre), turning it into an antic clown show, full of goofy music (Mercutio beatboxes, and it's O.K. to cringe) and everything-but-the-kitchen-sink directorial additions. Jung's updates to the language, like "I hope you ghosted us to score fair last night," are woven deftly into the old Elizabethan fabric, and her reworked script plumbs the original's often forgotten use of servants and musicians as wry, unsentimental commenters. In the show's two and a half hours, some of the team's ideas do wear thin (the lovers singing their lines, for instance), and the company's best comics—Daniel Liu, playing a chaotic combination of characters, and Mia Katigbak, droll as Juliet's Nurse—are sometimes overburdened. But Junghyun Georgia Lee's clever in-the-round set emphasizes a sense of a crowded muchness: we're in an attic or a junk shop, some dusty, golden place that encourages discovery. Pull open a random drawer and you might find something like Zion Jang's patient Benvolio, and that unexpected jewel makes the hunt worthwhile.—*Helen Shaw (Lynn F. Angelson Theatre; through June 3.)*

OFF BROADWAY



ILLUSTRATION BY OJIMA ABALAKA

The full title of **"The Cotillion,"** Colette Robert's new play with music, is "The Harriet Holland Social Club Presents the 84th Annual Star-Burst Cotillion in the Grand Ballroom of the Renaissance Hotel," and that exaggerated, super-elegant, ultrarefined sensibility—the centerpieces are tasteful, the gowns are divine—conveys the aesthetic for the playwright's blistering, all-caps discussion of Black élite debutante culture. In this co-production from New Georges and the Movement Theatre Company (at A.R.T./New York Theatres, through May 27), we spend an evening with six poised (or trying to be poised) seventeen-year-olds as they make their long-awaited début, all while their chapter's president (Akyiaa Wilson, excellent in moral decay) undermines them with colorist, oligarchic, puritanical concerns. Robert, who also directs, destabilizes the reality in the ballroom: characters accidentally refer to "auctions" during the ugliest parts of the beauty parade, and the world glitches and stutters like a horror film. As much as Robert wants to show us the skull beneath the updo, though, she's also dedicated to the loveliness of the event: songs (written by Dionne McClain-Freeney) decorate the play, performed by a glittering doo-wop quartet, who sing about sex, power, and Blackness with a sangfroid the teen-agers have yet to discover.—*Helen Shaw*

MOVIES

Blind Spot

The first feature by the German director Claudia von Alemann, from 1981, is an intimate drama with a vast purview. It's the story of a young West German scholar named Elisabeth (Rebecca Pauly), who, leaving her husband and her daughter behind, visits the French city of Lyon to do research about Flora Tristan, a feminist, a socialist activist, and a writer who organized workers there in 1844. Elisabeth's project has an existential edge—she records sound at sites where Tristan worked and lived, in an effort to re-create her subject's inner experience—as well as an intimate twist, involving her own romantic complications. Meanwhile, Elisabeth's chance encounters, as with a café owner and an antiquarian bookseller, take a historical turn as she also inquires into the massacre of Jews in Lyon by Nazi occupiers during the Second World War. Elisabeth's fascination with the embodiment of history is matched by von Alemann's documentary-like vision, which makes daily life amid the city's ancient buildings, tall stone staircases, and celebrated secret passageways reverberate with the passions and the horrors of the past.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on MUBI and Prime Video.)*

C'mon C'mon

Mike Mills's tender and turbulent melodrama, from 2021, amplifies its emotional power with a documentary current that runs throughout the action. When Viv (Gaby Hoffmann), a Los Angeles writer, has a family emergency, her brother, Johnny (Joaquin Phoenix), a New York radio producer, flies over to take care of her idiosyncratic and imaginative nine-year-old son, Jesse (Woody Norman). The loving yet uneasy bond between uncle and nephew is drawn in discerning and passionate detail, which the cast brings vividly to life. (Norman, spontaneous and intensely focussed, is among the great child actors.) Johnny's work involves travelling to interview young people about their lives and aspirations, and that project is integral to the drama: during his off-hours, he speaks trenchant and self-searching monologues into his tape recorder, giving rise to an intricate interplay of flashbacks. Johnny takes Jesse on a working road trip that challenges and deepens their relationship, and Mills weaves real-life interviews with kids into the fabric of the film, along with Johnny's extended riffs on the power of recording to, as he tells Jesse, "make mundane things be immortal."—*R.B. (Streaming on Tubi, Pluto, and other services.)*

Clockers

This Spike Lee picture, from 1995, is adapted from the 1992 thriller by Richard Price (the two collaborated on the screenplay), but thrills are low on the agenda of this nervy, knowing tale, which bristles with jokes and social problems where you would expect the plot to be. The "clockers" of the title—low-grade crack dealers who work the Brooklyn projects at all hours—belong to the only successful business in the neighborhood, an irony that gets the movie nicely fired up. Harvey Keitel plays a tired racist cop, and Mekhi Phifer, in his first movie role, portrays a Black kid suspected of murder, but neither of them is used as a star: instead, Lee wants to build an ensemble piece and bring a small world onto the screen while expressing large social ambitions. To a great extent, he succeeds. Though Lee can't resist an occasional fancy visual trick, the film, at its best—in its compound of the jaunty and the depressing—is the ripest work he'd done to that point.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 9/18/95.) (Streaming on Peacock, Prime Video, and other services.)*

No Ordinary Man

This meta-biographical documentary from 2020, about the jazz pianist and singer Billy Tipton, who lived from 1914 to 1989, uses an original form to challenge earlier published accounts of the musician's life. Tipton, who was assigned female at birth, began moving through life as a man in 1933. Although he was married and the father of three adopted sons, his family members were unaware of his trans identity until after his death. There's no extant footage of Tipton; to develop the audiovisual record, the film's directors, Aisling Chin-Yee and Chase Joynt, rely on a scripted drama (co-written by Chin-Yee and Amos Mac) and call upon trans male actors to rehearse and discuss it—and to consider their experiences in relation to Tipton's. One of the musician's sons, Billy Tipton, Jr., is also a key participant, as are trans activists and scholars; what emerges is the pathos of an oppressive era in which Tipton was forced to conceal his trans identity, had no institutional or medical support, and lived in fear—and which culminated, after his death, in prurient, derisive, and skeptical reporting that this film vigorously and movingly counteracts.—*R.B. (Streaming on Prime Video, Kanopy, MUBI, and other services.)*

WHAT TO STREAM

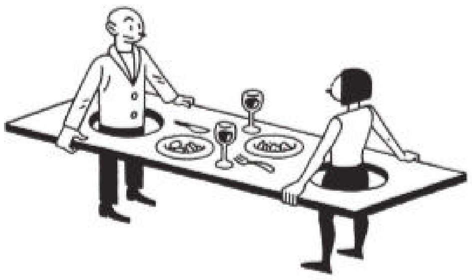


COURTESY WOMEN MAKE MOVIES

The appalling inhumanity of an ostensibly humanitarian program is brought to light in **"Something Like a War,"** from 1991, one in a group of documentaries by the Indian filmmaker Deepa Dhanraj that are streaming on the Criterion Channel. The program in question is population control in India, promoted—starting in the nineteen-fifties, with American assistance—under the euphemism of "family planning"; the battlegrounds are women's bodies, and the subject of conflict is forced sterilization. Dhanraj, amazingly, manages to film in the operating room of a factorylike clinic where women, mainly desperately poor ones, undergo laparoscopic sterilizations without anesthetic or aftercare, often as a result of their husbands' relentless pressure and the false promises of financial help by low-level government officials whose pay depends on meeting their quota. But, far from presenting women as mere victims of a ruthless system, Dhanraj centers the film on her copious and insightful discussions with a group of poor women in an agrarian village, who speak candidly about their lives—their bodies, their families, their deprivations, their sexuality, and their keen awareness of the oppressions that they endure in a regime that puts into action men's supremacist prejudices.—*Richard Brody*

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PHOTOGRAPH BY JUTHARAT PINYODOONYACHET FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

TABLES FOR TWO

Noona Noodles
11 W. 32nd St.

The other day, a friend taught me a word in Korean: 손맛, *sonmat*, which translates to "hand taste." It identifies the ineffable quality of food that is made by hand—specifically, by a lovingly careful hand, such as that of a mother. Over bubbly-skinned, fried mini *mandoo*, filled with juicy ground pork, and enormous steel bowls of *naengmyeon*, a cold noodle soup, my friend and I were pondering what makes Noona Noodles, a tiny stall in a multistory food court in Manhattan's Koreatown, so special, and we agreed: it was *sonmat*.

If Byung-Sul Kim, half of the team behind Noona, doesn't touch everything that comes out of its tiny kitchen, she comes pretty close. She's been cooking professionally since 1997, when her cousin, then the proprietor of Woo Chon, one of Manhattan's first Korean barbecue restaurants (now closed), invited her to open a twenty-four-hour outpost in Flushing, where Kim lived. In January of 2018, nearing sixty, Kim sold the Flushing restaurant, planning to retire. But, after just six months, she grew restless. She found the stall and decided to home in on noodles, naming the new business after her firstborn, Stella, who worked in branding and conceived of the restaurant's identity; in Korean, *noona* means "older sister of a brother."

In 2020, Stella joined her full time, to run the front-of-house operations, so that her mother could focus on the food, aided by a team of cooks from the Flushing Woo Chon, whom Stella told me she has known since she was a young child hiding in her mother's skirt. For such a small place, the menu is vast, offering nine varieties of ramen, including one finished with cilantro, lime, jalapeño, and a shot of tequila (a hangover cure if I've ever heard one) and the Frat Boy, topped with melted cheese and a juicy hot dog on a stick.

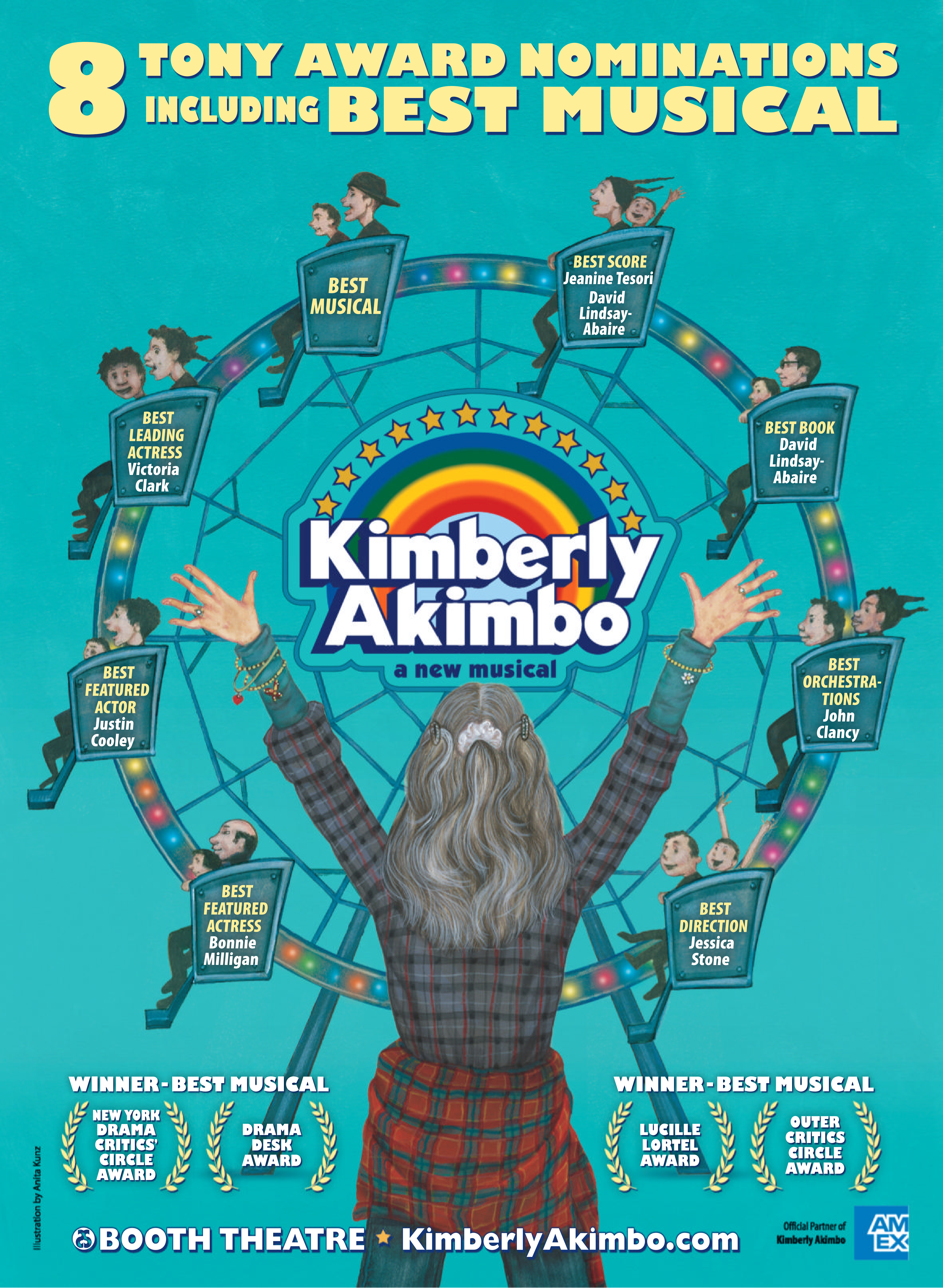
The ramen was excellent, but I was downright entranced by the two varieties of *naengmyeon*, a dish traditionally eaten after a meal of barbecue: *mul* and *bibim*, which Stella has cleverly rebranded as Icy and Icy Spicy. Both feature an intensely flavorful broth, which Kim makes by boiling brisket with fresh pineapple, Asian pear, apple, lemon, daikon, and assorted alliums. She seasons it with rice vinegar, kosher salt, and dark-brown sugar, then pours it into a refrigerated vat called a *yooksu tong* ("broth container"), designed specifically for *naengmyeon*.

To each bowl of finished broth, Kim adds big hunks of slushy ice, which soak up the sweet, sour, savory liquid like snow cones. In the center is a pile of skinny, chewy, glassy noodles, made from potato and buckwheat flours, plus thin slices of lightly pickled daikon and cucumber sprinkled with sesame seeds and a couple slices of brisket. The Icy Spicy also includes a thick layer of gochujang, to be stirred in (*bibim* means "mixed"); the Icy, which contains more broth (*mul* means "water"), comes with pink vinegar (left over from pickling radishes) and hot mustard, for adding a subtler kick, to taste.

I can think of no better summer meal than a bowl of *naengmyeon*. (Take your tray to the sunny third floor, where there are also karaoke rooms and, disturbingly, mannequins dressed like characters from "Squid Game.") I will crave the Sticky Crispy Dumplings year-round—a plate of crunchy-edged fried shrimp, pork, or vegetable pot stickers tossed with chunks of pineapple in a fiery sauce made with *gochugaru* (Korean chili flakes), garlic, ginger, ketchup, and honey. Chewy cylindrical rice cakes are an optional, advisable add-on.

When the weather cools, I will seek out the superlative *jjam bbong*, a spicy seafood soup rightly described on the menu as "iconic." Mussels, clams, head-on prawns, shrimp, and squid are sautéed with bok choy, zucchini, and mushrooms, then added, with springy wheat noodles, to a collagen-rich chicken broth seasoned with kombu dashi and anchovies. You can ask for more or less finely ground *gochugaru* and puréed jalapeños, to modify the heat, but I found Kim's default measurement to be just right. There's nothing on the menu I wouldn't leave in her hands. *(Dishes $6-$21.)*

—Hannah Goldfield


8 TONY AWARD NOMINATIONS INCLUDING BEST MUSICAL
BEST MUSICAL
BEST SCORE Jeanine Tesori David Lindsay-Abaire
BEST LEADING ACTRESS Victoria Clark
BEST BOOK David Lindsay-Abaire
Kimberly Akimbo
a new musical
BEST FEATURED ACTOR Justin Cooley
BEST ORCHESTRATIONS John Clancy
BEST FEATURED ACTRESS Bonnie Milligan
BEST DIRECTION Jessica Stone
WINNER - BEST MUSICAL
NEW YORK DRAMA CRITICS' CIRCLE AWARD
DRAMA DESK AWARD
WINNER - BEST MUSICAL
LUCILLE LORTEL AWARD
OUTER CRITICS CIRCLE AWARD
Illustration by Anita Kunz
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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

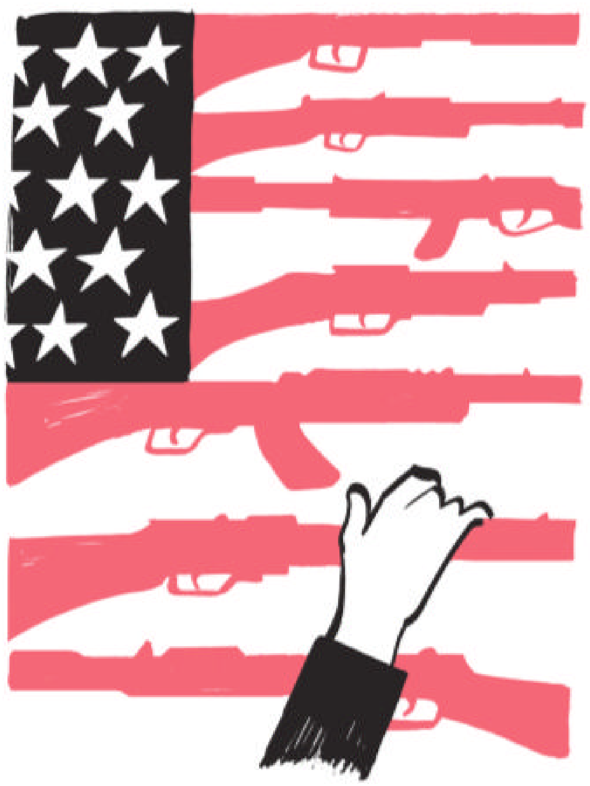
COMMENT
FIRING LINES

Some visions of how to live well in America are inextricably linked to owning a gun. Donald Trump certainly took that view recently, in a CNN town hall at Saint Anselm College, in New Hampshire, before an audience of Republicans and independents. Indeed, he presented guns as necessary for survival in a dark and violent landscape. "Remember, we have seven hundred million guns—seven hundred million. Many people, if they don't have a gun, they're not going to be very safe," he said. "Many of them would not be alive today." He condemned Chicago and New York for having tight gun restrictions, praised Brazil for loosening its laws, and called for arming teachers, many of whom, he claimed, are "soldiers, ex-soldiers, ex-policemen" who "really understand weapons."

Trump's event was so riddled with falsehoods that it hardly registered that his seven-hundred-million figure was wrong. The actual number of guns in the United States is estimated to be close to four hundred million (more than ninety-five per cent of which are in civilian hands). It's still a huge number—the U.S. has both more guns and more gun deaths per capita than any other wealthy nation, according to the gun-safety advocacy group Giffords. One in every three firearm suicides on the planet occurs in this country.

Yet, in the town hall, when a member of the Saint Anselm College Republicans questioned Trump on the subject, the student asked not about stopping gun violence but about his concern that, with all the gun violence and mass shootings in the news, politicians would act to "repress gun rights." He also wanted to know how Trump would "restore rights that have been taken from us." It was, oddly enough, one of the few moments when Trump appeared defensive, because the student seemed discontent with his decision, after a shooter killed fifty-eight people in Las Vegas, in 2017, to ban bump stocks, which can effectively allow semi-automatic firearms (which are readily available) to act like machine guns (the purchase of which is very highly restricted). Trump replied that he was aligned with the N.R.A. on bump stocks; in fact, the N.R.A. said that it was "disappointed" by the ban.

The exchange captured a number of factors that are converging to make this a particularly critical moment in the story of guns in America. One is judicial: New York State Rifle & Pistol Association, Inc., et al. v. Bruen, the Supreme Court decision from last summer that struck down New York's permit requirements for carrying a concealed handgun, has set off a stream of litigation. The majority opinion, written by Clarence Thomas, holds that courts, when looking at gun laws, should begin by presuming that "ordinary, law abiding citizens" basically have the right to own whatever guns they want and to carry them wherever they choose. The burden would then be on the government to show that any limits on that right comport with Thomas's highly selective sense of the nation's "historical tradition." Stephen Breyer, in a dissent, suggested that even the Justices in the majority might not know what laws could survive under the new standard. It's looking like he was right.



For example, the Saint Anselm student may not need to worry much longer about anyone being deprived of a bump stock. In January, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the ban was unlawful—a decision that the Biden Administration is appealing to the Supreme Court—and the Sixth Circuit did the same last month. And, a few weeks ago, a district-court judge in Virginia, citing Bruen, threw out a federal minimum-age requirement of twenty-one to buy handguns, which would make it legal for people as young as eighteen to do so; several similar cases are being heard.

Gun-rights advocates have also been pressing for new laws to make it easier to be armed. The result is a judicial and legislative free-for-all that is intersecting, disastrously, with the 2024 Presidential race. Last month, Governor Ron DeSantis,

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

of Florida, who is expected to announce his campaign for the Republican nomination this week, signed a bill allowing most adults to carry concealed guns without a state permit. (Twenty-six other states now have similar laws.) "You don't need a permission slip from the government to be able to exercise your constitutional rights," DeSantis said, according to Politico. He was speaking at Adventure Outdoors, in Smyrna, Georgia, an establishment that the Atlanta *Journal-Constitution* described as a "firearms superstore." Georgia, of course, will be a battleground state in 2024. But even that reckless posturing wasn't good enough for some gun advocates in Florida, who complained that DeSantis hadn't done away with restrictions on openly brandishing a weapon.

The internal dynamics of the G.O.P. appear to be pushing Presidential contenders to increasingly extreme positions. Not that most of them need much prodding on guns: former Vice-President Mike Pence, who has indicated that he is considering running, has long been something of a Second Amendment fundamentalist. Nikki Haley, the former South Carolina governor and a declared candidate, recently said that focussing on guns as a means to reduce gun violence was "lazy." And, as the town hall demonstrated, even Trump is not exempt from the pressure. The Bruen decision is part of his legacy—he appointed three of the six Justices who signed the majority opinion. From the perspective of Republican activists, expanding on that victory is now his task, or that of whoever else wants to be President.

Yet there may be a parallel here to the right's overreach on abortion since Roe v. Wade was overturned. There is widespread revulsion at mass violence and the toll that it takes, particularly on children. A Gallup poll a few months ago showed that, although most G.O.P. voters don't want stricter gun laws, a majority don't want looser ones, either. In a number of blue states, there are efforts under way to pass gun-safety laws that supporters hope will pass scrutiny under Bruen. On Tuesday, for instance, Wes Moore, the governor of Maryland, signed legislation restricting the places where people can bring guns—not to schools, hospitals, or polling stations. (The same day, the N.R.A. sued to block the law.)

In contrast, Jim Justice, the Republican governor of West Virginia, signed a "campus carry" bill in March that not only allows guns for those with permits on college and university grounds but directs administrators to provide gun-storage units in dorms. The gun-law terrain has rarely been more unsettled. What makes the impending fight over gun safety, amid an election, all the more hazardous is Trumpism itself, with its incessant invocation of the prospect of political violence, and its message for America: if you want to make your way in this country, make sure that you have a gun.

—*Amy Davidson Sorkin*

THE MUSICAL LIFE
KESHA CALM



An S.U.V., its windows tinted to dusk, delivered the singer Kesha to the Ruttkowski;68 gallery on Cortlandt Alley one recent afternoon. Inside the space, an Italian artist named Francesco Igory Deiana waited for her embrace. A Kesha hello goes for the neck. Deiana leaned forward, putting his tattooed hand in her tattooed hand. Not long ago, Deiana, Kesha, and their respective boyfriends had hung out on what Kesha called a "secret beach in Hawaii."

Setting aside an iced matcha, Kesha removed her sunglasses and squinted at the light. She sighed and reported on her condition: "I feel underslept and overexcitable." There had been Dua Lipa's Met Gala after-party the night before, at Virgo, and the next night there would be a listening party for her fifth album, "Gag Order."

Looking around at the panels of bright geometries, she asked Deiana what he had titled his show. "Crazy Angel," he said. She stomped her black Coperni boots, her black skirt swishing like monkwear.

On the cover of "Gag Order," Kesha is expressionless, her head sealed inside a plastic bag. She sings of leaving her existence on the cross, of doctors and lawyers cutting out her tongue. She sings mostly without the Auto-Tune that was once her compulsion, achieving that Janis Joplin velvet. She made "Gag Order" with the producer Rick Rubin at a house in Hawaii. ("I had, like, a yard," she said.) Rubin began the sessions with meditation, which sometimes incited weeping, hours of it. With the new record, Kesha coaxed herself away from the rah-rah fan service of "High Road," her previous album. With Rubin, b.p.m.s were slowed. In the evenings, she howled at the moon. "It just feels cooler," she said, of her new work. "Less thirsty."

In the gallery, Deiana quizzed her about what she saw in his patterns: "This almost reminded me of a car graphic—"

She cut in: "It looks like my '78 Trans hood ornament." She got looser. "Hold on, hold on," she said. "My first thought was a vagina."

Deiana laughed. "It's funny because everybody sees sexual stuff in my work, but it's never intentional."



Kesha

"Or I would say," she added, "either mountains or two people."

He gave the right answer: "It's two high heels crossing. Can you see it?"

When Kesha was a child in Nashville, she dragged her mother, the songwriter Pebe Sebert, to a megachurch. "I've been seeking pretty much since I can remember," Kesha said. She searched and searched but could not find God in the place. "I walked out of church," she said. "I studied comparative reli-

gion at Columbia the summer before I dropped out of school and started singing professionally."

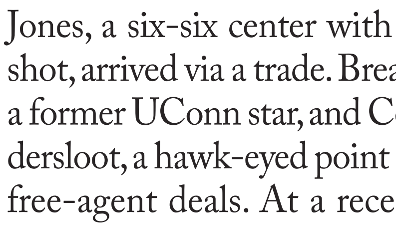
Kesha is thirty-six, twice the age she was when she signed her first record contract, a bad one. When speaking, she spends volume sparingly, as if protecting her throat. At her début, in the late two-thousands, she came off as a pop storm, her eye circled with glitter like a droog; she left a trail of ironic white-girl waste wherever she went. "I'm so used to people saying they miss the old Kesha," she said. "If artists do the same thing, we're unhappy. If they change too much, we're unhappy."

"Gag Order" may be her last album on Kemosabe Records; her contract is the subject of legal proceedings, which she said she can't talk about. In 2014, Kesha sued Dr. Luke, who released her first record, for sexual assault and battery. He sued her back, for defamation. The trial starts in July. The ordeal has made her fans consecrate her as an avenging angel.

Deiana produced a chair so that Kesha could sit and contemplate the exhibition's titular painting. She slipped off her boots, then her socks, and then narrated the history of the tattoos on her feet. She said that she was looking forward to the summer. "Gag Order" contains an ode to reincarnation. Kesha wants to come back as her cat Mr. Peeps. He was the one who calmed her when panic took over. "My cat has never done this before," she said. "But he's carrying my headphones in his mouth. And I was, like, 'O.K. This is happening.'" Before leaving, Kesha posed for a photo with Deiana in front of "Crazy Angel." Sunglasses on.

—*Doreen St. Félix*

DEPT. OF ORIENTATION
NEW KIDS



This past winter, the New York Liberty went on an acquisition spree unprecedented in W.N.B.A. history. Jonquel Jones, a six-six center with a silky jump shot, arrived via a trade. Breanna Stewart, a former UConn star, and Courtney Vandersloot, a hawk-eyed point guard, signed free-agent deals. At a recent preseason practice at Barclays Center, in Brooklyn, a group of reporters appraised the new arrivals. "Sloot was the big surprise," a sportswriter named Jackie Powell said, referring to Vandersloot. "She played with her wife in Chicago." Powell covers the Liberty for The Next, a women's-basketball news site. As players ran drills up and down the court, Stewart appeared on the sideline, wearing a pair of her signature Puma Stewie 2 Ruby sneakers.

After practice, Stewart, Jones, and Vandersloot met for lunch at the empty Crown Club, a private night club situated in the bowels of the arena. Boxed lunches had been provided by the team. "We're here to change the way the league is going about its business," Stewart said, opening a container of strip steak with pineapple sauce. "The amenities and facilities that we have here, it's eye-opening. You come in, and there's breakfast every single day. There's treatment. There are all these people to help you." Jones concurred. "Some days, I'll leave the gym, and I'm literally, like, 'I think I'm good, I really don't need to eat any more,'" she said, forking some stir-fried noodles with vegetables. Jones spent her first six years in the league playing for the Connecticut Sun: "The most you had there was a shake or a smoothie. Or a wrap from a fridge." Stewart knocked back a ginger shot and grimaced. "That one's brutal!" Vandersloot said.

The Liberty wasn't always a strip-steak-and-ginger-shot team. For years, the franchise languished under the ownership of James Dolan, the owner of the Knicks. In 2018, he banished the Liberty from Madison Square Garden, forcing the team to play its home games at the Westchester County Center, a five-thousand-seat venue in White Plains. In 2019, Joe and Clara Tsai, the owners of the Brooklyn Nets, bought the team from Dolan and ended its suburban exile. "New York is obviously a basketball city," Stewart said. "Where New York can improve is being a women's-basketball city as well."

Talk turned to the nature of super teams. The idea of the three women playing for the same W.N.B.A. team had first come up on a long-running group chat. "I think it started with, like, the eyes emoji, you know?" Stewart said.

"Stewie's the queen of the emojis," Jones said.



Courtney Vandersloot, Jonquel Jones, and Breanna Stewart

Vandersloot, who just turned thirty-four, said she'd realized that she had only so many years left to play. "It's about getting like-minded people on the same team," she said. "It's not about the talent as much."

The Nets learned this lesson recently. Their experiment with super-team status ended in frustration in February, with the departures of Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving. "When I watched them play, it felt very much like a bunch of individual people doing their individual thing," Jones said. "Didn't seem like there was any cohesiveness to what they had going on."

Stewart, Jones, and Vandersloot previously spent seasons as teammates on U.M.M.C. Ekaterinburg, in the Russian Premier League. Many W.N.B.A. players go abroad in the off-season, to make money, a fact that gained international attention last year, when Russia detained Brittney Griner. This winter, Vandersloot, avoiding Russia, played in Turkey. "When I go overseas, I go with two suitcases, and I leave with two suitcases," she said. "When you're in the W.N.B.A., I think it's really important that you make it feel like home."

All three players are just getting to know New York. Jones and Vandersloot live in team housing. They've been talking about going to Broadway shows. Jones likes the avocado toast at a coffee shop called Companion. Stewart and her wife, the former W.N.B.A. player Marta Xargay, have rented an apartment that's within walking distance of both Barclays Center and the preschool that

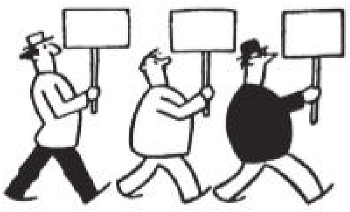
their daughter, Ruby, attends. "I wanted to be in a place where my family can be comfortable," Stewart said. "We're in Brooklyn. We're not in the craziness of Manhattan."

In the late nineteen-nineties, the Liberty often played to large crowds at the Garden. The three players are convinced that, if the team wins as many games as it hopes to, New York will buy into it again. "Winning brings people together," Vandersloot said.

"Hopefully, we're going to be here for a little while," Stewart added.

—*Eric Lach*

AT THE MUSEUMS
LABOR OF LOVE



"I remember all this—it's just, like, flashbacks," Chris Smalls said, standing in a gallery at the Whitney Museum. Smalls, a former Amazon warehouse worker, has become the unlikely face of the labor movement. He was examining a series of sculptures called "Blue Collars," part of a survey show by the artist Josh Kline, who was planning to meet him in the gallery. To Smalls's left was a shopping cart stuffed with Walmart boxes and disembodied arms, cast from the limb of a real Walmart employee, named Jason. Along with an Applebee's waitress, a FedEx delivery worker, and a hotel cleaner, Jason had allowed Kline to do a 3-D scan of his body for the project.

"I worked at Walmart, I worked at FedEx," Smalls, who is thirty-four, said. "We work, and we give up our body parts," he added, musing on the sculpture. "Over time, these jobs will break you down."

For the past fifteen years, Kline has made satirical, often uncomfortably prescient art about the dehumanizing nature of work and the ways in which technology makes workers disposable. He doesn't consider himself an activist, however. "I know the difference between real activism and what I'm doing," he said.

Kline showed up in gray jeans, a tan T-shirt, and a ball cap. It would have been easy to assume that Smalls—in patent-leather Prada high-tops, gold grills, and Versace sunglasses—was the celebrated artist. The two men were meeting for the first time and seemed nervous. Kline apologized to Smalls for being "a little out of it." He'd been working fifteen-hour days to prepare for his show about labor, and had lost six pounds.

"Don't worry, man," Smalls said. "I just came from a rally. I'm the same way right now." Smalls, whom *Time* magazine named one of the "100 Most Influential People of 2022," led the first successful union drive at an Amazon warehouse. For the past two years, he has served as president of the Amazon Labor Union, where tensions about how best to bring the second-largest company in the world to the bargaining table are running high. (The day after the Whitney visit, a video was leaked of Smalls and a fellow union member coming to blows outside Smalls's former workplace, JFK8 Amazon, in Staten Island.) "Being an organizer is a lot more work than Amazon," he said. "But it's a lot less strenuous on the body." This was his first time at the Whitney. Years ago, he worked for a food-service company that catered parties at the Museum of Modern Art.

Kline and Smalls walked into a dimly lit installation called "Contagious Unemployment" (2016). Transparent orbs in the shapes of common viruses hung from the ceiling, each containing a cardboard box filled with the paperweights, picture frames, and other personal effects of a fictional white-collar worker who had been laid off.

"I was thinking a lot about my father," Kline said, looking at the work. "He lost his job when I was a teen-ager, and people treated him like a leper, like he was contagious with something awful." Today, the sculptures evoke the isolation of workers during the pandemic. "It was a metaphor, and then it became very real," Kline added.

"How does it feel to know you predicted it?" Smalls asked. Amazon fired him, he said, after he helped organize a protest of the company's COVID safety protocols. (An Amazon spokesperson has said the firing was for repeatedly "violating social-distancing guidelines.")

"Hopefully, the rest of my work doesn't come true," Kline said.

Strolling through Kline's techno-dystopia, the pair swapped stories about Amazon boxes: Kline used them as flooring for installations. Smalls once stacked them to create a nearly seven-foot-tall Christmas tree outside Jeff Bezos's Manhattan apartment, as part of a protest. They discussed which politicians excited them (none), whether it would be more effective to cancel Amazon Prime (Smalls) or to nationalize it (Kline), and their com-



"Your morbid curiosity about the afterlife is scaring the children."

mon goal of making the working class more visible.

"We don't make it look like it's cool to join a union," Smalls said. "What if unions had a Super Bowl commercial?"

He gestured toward one of the art works, a video of a "commercial" for universal basic income. Inspired by a Bernie Sanders ad, it shows the things that society could accomplish—cure cancer, care for aging parents—if we weren't scrambling to make ends meet.

Would Smalls ever consider running for office, Kline asked.

"I don't want to do politics," Smalls said. "But I'll do whatever it takes to save this planet. If I'm doing it, I'm going to go for President. I'm not going to be no middleman."

—*Julia Halperin*

DEPT. OF KINDNESS
IN PLAIN SIGHT



Kyle Berlin was recently recollecting the genesis of an idea: "Every student I knew was in some way or another anxious or depressed, and I'm not sure why. It still baffles me."

This was five years ago, well before you-know-what, and at Princeton University, a rarefied realm of how could this be. Berlin, from Arroyo Grande, California, was the valedictorian of the class of 2018. He often met at 8 A.M., under a Korean dogwood tree on campus, with his chaplain, Matthew Weiner, the school's associate dean of religious life, known to students as Dean Matt. They'd been batting around the question of compassion, and how to cultivate it in a high-powered setting, where the emphasis seemed always to be on matters of excellence, performance, efficiency, and survival. Institutions do not, as a matter of course, perpetuate kindness.

One morning, Weiner told Berlin about something that he'd noticed at lunch the day before. The woman responsible for swiping the diners' meal cards had been smiling and chattering with students as they filed by, converting a glum procession into a buoyant parade. Dean Matt thought, She's doing my job.

"That's Catalina!" Berlin said. He'd known her since freshman year. "She's a hidden chaplain," he added. He named a couple of others. "Hidden chaplain": this, then, would be the term they'd use for staff members (not professors!) who, in their regular encounters, brightened students' days. This unwitting ministry combined elements of angelic supervision, parental nurturing, and what Berlin called "quietly glorious acts of caring."

They printed up postcards—"Who is your hidden chaplain?"—and distributed them in a surreptitious way around campus. Nominations poured in, and a new tradition, in a place already thick with old ones, was born. "I really appreciated the organic and rogue informality of it," Berlin said.

Earlier this month, the hidden chaplains were summoned to a now-annual banquet at Murray-Dodge Hall, the religious-life HQ. There were about a hundred celebrants: some fifty hidden chaplains, plus their guests, and about half as many students. (A hundred and nineteen students had submitted names.)

Catalina Maldonado-Lopez (*the* Catalina) sat in a corner with her daughter Gloria. She wore a blue button-down and jeans: "I met Kyle in 2014. He asked me, 'How do you have so much energy?' And I said, 'If I don't talk to you guys, I'll feel your sadness.' My job is very simple. It's boring if you don't talk. I'm just a mama with five kids. And I feel like these kids are part of my kids. Their mama's not here. 'You see this crazy woman? I hope my crooked smile is making you happy!'"

Nearby, three other hidden chaplains from dining services, Jackeline Davis, Mumu Pwee, and Thomas Stallone ("as in the Italian Stallion," he said), sat with Rosmeilyn Jerez, a senior from Miami, who'd nominated Stallone. He had worked his way up from pot-scrubber to cook in a university kitchen, and now, in semi-retirement, he, like Catalina, was swiping meal cards. "The students put a lot of confidence in me," he said. "I don't have kids of my own. It makes me feel—I hate to use the word 'important.'"

"Valued," Pwee said.

"It's precious—the acknowledgment," Davis said. "And I think it makes the students feel great to do something for the staff."

Nely Serrano Rivas, a sophomore from El Salvador, by way of Oakland, said that her mother was a custodian at the library at U.C. Berkeley and was, in her own way, a hidden chaplain. "I can't walk by the people who work here without saying hi," Rivas said. "I can see the parent in them. This inspires us to see *them*, to be on the lookout, and meanwhile they're on the lookout for people who see them."

Someone produced a microphone, and, one by one, students and staff stood to pay tribute to one another, as though at a wedding where everyone was getting married to everyone else.

Mia González Guerrero, a barista in the library café, who'd been nominated by eight students, exclaimed, "This is my Oscar!" She had on white jeans and high heels. "You guys are good people. You have love in your heart. We have to have love for the students. Because they are the ones who pay our checks."

At a table in back sat the man who would be cleaning up this celebration the following morning: Keith Upshur, from Trenton. He had been a custodian at the school's art museum for fifteen years but had recently transferred to Murray-Dodge, because the museum was undergoing an expansion. Fifty-eight and lean, he had on a Nike cap and a checked shirt, and was accompanied by a woman in a green parka, with matching fingernails.

Upshur didn't know the name of the student who nominated him. "But I think I know who it is," he said. "I conversate with him. He's Muslim. He comes for Friday prayers.

"I'm the fourth of ten kids," he continued. "I'm a spiritual person, a Christian. I've had a million jobs. Drove a cab, worked in a steel mill. I was a very talkative cabdriver. At the steel mill, I had an experience like this, too. We had mentors, you know? It was so dangerous in there, you had to have them. I've seen guys lose legs, hands, arms. Fingers."

"One of my friends was cut in half," the woman said.

"This is *my* hidden chaplain right here," he said, gesturing toward her.

She splayed out her left hand. "Ain't no ring on it," she said.

"You'll get it," he said. As to the question of the existence of angels, he averred that they were all around us, and that any of us might be one.

—*Nick Paumgarten*

ANNALS OF GASTRONOMY

AMERICAN FLAVOR

A television host puts Black cuisine at the center of the nation's history.

BY DOROTHY WICKENDEN



Stephen Satterfield, the host of the Netflix food-history series "High on the Hog," was bent over the stove in his parents' kitchen, near Atlanta. It was one o'clock on a February afternoon, and he was preparing Sunday dinner for the family. Most of the meal was canonical Black Southern food: turnip greens simmered for hours, cheese grits, biscuits baked in a cast-iron skillet. The main course was catfish, coated in cornmeal and sizzling in avocado oil. The fish, though, had a widely disputed accompaniment. With a dimpled smile, Satterfield lifted a lid to reveal a pot full of spaghetti and tomato sauce.

Depending on whom you ask, this combination is either as congenial as shrimp and grits or as regrettable as a bad marriage. The food writer Adrian Miller once noted, "It may be the most controversial soul food coupling since someone decided it was a good idea to marinate dill pickles in Kool-Aid." Satterfield, who is thirty-nine, first encountered the dish as a family tradition: in Mississippi, where his maternal grandmother was born, the river was full of catfish, and spaghetti was cheap. In 1946, she and his grandfather followed the Great Migration route north to Gary, Indiana. When Stephen was growing up, his father often fixed catfish and spaghetti for Sunday dinners and for church fish fries.

Stephen Satterfield calls food an "efficient means of helping people to see themselves."

Satterfield didn't realize the pairing's wider significance until he was getting ready for an episode of "High on the Hog," which refracts the history of the United States through the lens of Black food. Miller, who appears in the series, had an explanation: catfish and spaghetti originated in the Deep South in the late eighteen-hundreds, as Italian immigrants settled in Mississippi and Louisiana. Black Southerners adopted spaghetti, and came to consider it, like coleslaw or potato salad, a pleasing side dish to fried fish.

This is what Satterfield calls a good origin story: an unexpected confluence of historical streams. There are countless others. Peanuts, a key ingredient in West African stews, got their American nickname, goobers, from the Bantu word *nguba.* George Washington's Presidential kitchen was run by an enslaved man named Hercules, until he escaped servitude and vanished.

Such stories about the African diaspora's influences on American cuisine are disclosed in rich detail by Jessica B. Harris in the 2011 book "High on the Hog"—the basis for the show. Produced and directed almost entirely by African Americans, the series features Black chefs, pitmasters, historians, farmers, entrepreneurs, and cookbook writers discussing their heritages and creating delectable meals. Satterfield presides like an unusually solicitous reporter: he listens intently as his guests excavate buried histories and lends a hand as they cook.

At his parents' house, Satterfield, a bearded, loose-limbed six feet five, had a sous-chef: his girlfriend, Gabriella Oviedo, a writer who also collaborates on his business. But, having spent his twenties training at high-end restaurants, he had things under control. Half a dozen family members milled hungrily around the living room, until Satterfield's father, Sam, returned from church. Familiar with his son's self-described "bougie tastes," Sam apparently expected a showy meal, but he was pleasantly surprised. "Stephen!" he exclaimed. "You made catfish and spaghetti!"

Harris sometimes cites an African proverb: "When the tale of the hunt is written by the lion, it will be a very different tale." With the series, Satterfield and his partners wanted to upend Amer-

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRAD OGBONNA

icans' view of their history. They knew how difficult it would be to do that in four episodes, beginning in the slave markets of West Africa and tracing centuries of suffering and transcendence in the United States. But Satterfield trusted in the seductive power of good cooking: "How do you get away with it if it's not about food?" In the second episode, "The Rice Kingdom," the culinary historian Michael Twitty prepares okra-and-crab soup at the Magnolia Plantation, outside Charleston. "Despite the fact that we were in Hell . . . that we were being worked to death," he said, "we created a cuisine." This food, he noted, was named for the soul—"something invisible that you could feel, like love and God."

"High on the Hog" débuted when many Americans were in an unusually reflective mood, after the George Floyd murder and a year into the pandemic. Justin Kirkland, in *Esquire*, called the series "revolutionary." In the *Times*, Osayi Endolyn wrote, "It hits the eye, mind and soul differently than any other food television program, because it simply does what so few have been willing to do: give Black people space to explore and express our own joy." The series, whose second season will be released this fall, is available in a hundred and ninety countries, with subtitles in Portuguese, Arabic, and twenty-nine other languages. Satterfield said, "It proved my thesis: food is the most efficient means of helping people to see themselves."

The city of Gary isn't much to look at these days. In its prime, it contained one of North America's biggest steel plants, the Gary Works, which employed tens of thousands of people. But half a century after white flight and deindustrialization, the formerly booming business district consists mostly of razed lots, boarded-up storefronts, and decrepit buildings. Satterfield describes Gary as "the literal embodiment of the deflation of a dream." So when he visited last year with his sister Ashley he was surprised to spot Bugsy's Tavern, a busy watering hole with a cheerful Bugs Bunny knockoff on the roof. "It defies explanation," he said—a white-owned biker bar near the old color line. "It's a neutral gathering zone, in a mostly Black city."

During my visit, we pulled into the parking lot of Bugsy's. Satterfield warned me, "There's a lot of smoking. You'll want to wash your clothes afterward." A casually snappy dresser, he had arrived in cashmere trousers. "I'm going to do my change of wardrobe now," he said, and slipped on a cotton hoodie and quilted navy sweats.

Ashley, a bartender at Atlanta's old Colonnade restaurant, is Stephen's closest companion, and the family's self-appointed deflater of egos. (When I asked if Stephen did any cooking as a kid, she rolled her eyes and said, "He always burned things.") She is also the historian for an extensive clan. When she was a girl, she liked nothing better than listening to her elders' stories.

Gary was established in 1906, by a subsidiary of the United States Steel Corporation; newspaper stories lured Black Southerners and European immigrants to the Magic City of Steel. When Sam was a child, in the fifties, Gary was known for its innovative schools, striking architecture, and rapid economic growth. It was also segregated, with an invisible barrier that Sam's siblings wouldn't cross. As a young man, Sam worked at the mill, as a switchman for railcars that moved giant vats of molten steel. Men lost limbs and suffered hideous burns, but employees earned what Sam called "crazy money," and many Satterfields thought of Gary as "the best place in the world." Sam knew that it couldn't last. One day, as he watched a ship being unloaded, he noticed crates marked "Product of China," and realized, "This is all collapsing." He embarked on a reverse migration, moving to Atlanta in 1976.

Inside Bugsy's, the walls and ceiling were hung with Harley-Davidson paraphernalia, road signs, and posters advertising Bike Night and Ladies' Night. Aging bikers sat around, absorbed in their cigarettes and longnecks. Most observed us with mild curiosity, but one bandy-legged man with lank gray hair ambled over unsteadily. Pointing to the jukebox, he said, "I played all these great songs." Then he informed us that he was an undercover agent for the C.I.A., and staggered off.

On a barstool, beer in hand, Stephen talked about Black Americans' fraught relationship to land and food. For centuries, they had no way to own the farms they worked: "Cotton was for capital. We're basically still there, in a slightly altered form—displacement and disenfranchisement through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, redlining, gentrification."

Earlier, we had visited the ruins of the Satterfield homestead, bushwhacking through thorny weeds to the foundation of the house that Sam's father built. Ashley pointed to the place where their grandparents had tended a vegetable garden, which, along with squirrels and rabbits caught by Sam's uncles, helped feed their large family. At the bar, Stephen said, "Our dad grew up with a garden. Our mom grew up with a garden. Our grandparents grew their own food." In talks, he often mentions Black farmers who raise fresh produce in food deserts, "so that we can reclaim our health." Ashley interjected, "But a lot of people say, 'I don't have to do that anymore.'" Stephen nodded: "Our mom believed, 'We've worked our asses off so that you don't have to toil in the field.'"

When he and Ashley were little, they lived with their parents and their maternal grandmother in a split-level in Decatur, sharing the house with a series of foster children. Their mother, Deborah, and grandmother, Louise, were among a group of tough-minded, loving matriarchs known as the "Weaver women." Louise, a superb cook, ran the kitchen, with help from Sam, and prided herself on her layer cakes and peach cobblers. Stephen recalled, "Watching my dad and my granny in the kitchen together—it was magic." Extended family and friends were invited to Sunday dinners, and on holidays it wasn't uncommon to have thirty guests.

Louise died at fifty-nine, of complications from diabetes. "The family shattered," Stephen said. Later in his childhood, his older brother, Sam, Jr., succumbed to lupus. "I thought funerals were what people did."

In 1989, Deborah and Sam moved with the children to Stone Mountain, thirteen miles northeast of Atlanta. The town's namesake bears a two-hundred-foot-wide monument to the leaders of the Confederacy: a graven image of Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and Jefferson Davis on horseback, holding their hats over their hearts. Satterfield described Stone Mountain as "a place that perpetuated a new mythology for

losers"—beginning in 1915, when the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross atop the mountain before "The Birth of a Nation" premièred in Atlanta. At Fourth of July celebrations, Ashley recalled, men in uniform and women in hoopskirts waved Confederate flags. Stephen said, "It was normalized in our upbringing, living at the foot of this crazy white monument."

The town was diverse, though. Stephen talked about his elementary school as a "rainbow nation" of local children and immigrants from Ethiopia, Cambodia, and Russia. Deborah wanted her children to be comfortable with everyone, and to be proud of their heritage. She encouraged them to play with kids of all backgrounds, and used a marker to color their Christmas-tree angel brown. But, when they were finishing elementary school, "Deborah's ambition kicks in," Stephen said.

Deborah has a Ph.D. and works as a public-school principal. Still, she told me, "I wanted them to do better." She had Stephen and Ashley tested for admission to Westminster, in Atlanta's exclusive Buckhead neighborhood, a school that bills itself as "rooted in Christian values and wholesome intensity." When Deborah told the kids that they'd got in, they were inconsolable. "Everything I knew was over," Stephen said. But their mother insisted, "You all deserve to be around the best."

Westminster has a stone-gated entry, fastidiously tended athletic fields, and imposing brick and limestone buildings. The Satterfields' classmates, identically dressed in polo shirts and khakis, were almost all white. Stephen began skipping classes. Taking his journal, a joint, and a tab of acid into the woods, he'd sit and write poetry. "I was 'psychedelic boy'—miscast from the sixties," he said. "The other kids took Adderall and antidepressants."

During his freshman year, his English teacher offered an extra-credit assignment, which, Satterfield calculated, could "propel me to a high C." He turned in a poem called "Child of the Grass." After class, the teacher told him that he had talent, but needed to apply himself. "I don't know what you're doing, but knock it off," she said. "You are a gifted writer." Satterfield came away with a different message: "my relationship to learning through my own inquiry."

Even then, he was keenly self-aware. "I knew I could charm kids into liking me," he said. "I was athletic, and a funny, popular stoner. I sometimes exploited it." He cultivated a wide circle of acquaintances, but spent most of his time with his friend Burch Shufeldt and Burch's girlfriend, Lauren. They passed the afternoons by getting high and watching the Food Network. Satterfield revered Mario Batali and Anthony Bourdain, but it was Julia Child on PBS—fluty-voiced, dish towel tucked into the waist of a frumpy dress—who ignited his romance with cooking: "I watched her make a cheese soufflé, plunging two spoons back to back into the middle, and a perfect steam rising up." He bought "Mastering the Art of French Cooking," and meticulously followed her recipe for soufflé au fromage. "I'll be damned," he said. "It came out perfectly. It was the first success I'd had."

The friends hung out at the Shufeldts', in Ansley Park, which Burch describes as a neighborhood of "big-ass houses." Satterfield's time in Atlanta's wealthy precincts was sobering: "I thought, We're so fucking broke. I felt bad for my parents. I'd never seen the spoils that money got." In the eighties, his father had lost his job at UPS after a back injury. Once he recovered, he worked odd jobs and managed restaurants. Burch's father was a banker at SunTrust. "The other kids' dads were away on business, or were racist senators who didn't interact with us," Satterfield said. But the Shufeldts welcomed him. Before dinner, Mr. Shu, as Satterfield calls him, would disappear into his wine cellar and emerge with a bottle of good Bordeaux or Burgundy, which he encouraged the boys to enjoy. Satterfield vowed "to learn what Mr. Shu knew," he told me. "I wanted to speak that language. It's a kind of passport."

In Chicago, I met Satterfield for a late dinner at Obélix, a buzzy French restaurant that he wanted to try. Its industrial windows looked out onto a snow squall, but inside it was bright and warm, filled with the din of guests who had paid a small fortune for exquisite food. Satterfield ordered for us, assuring me, "Don't worry—if there's anything you don't want, I'll eat it. I'm like a garbage disposal."

We had *poisson cru*, with a glass of Crozes-Hermitage Blanc for me and a Gimonnet champagne for him. There were grilled leeks vinaigrette, seared Hokkaido scallop with Okinawa sweet potato, green-curry velouté, squab in puff pastry. To accompany the squab, Satterfield ordered a glass of Pinot Noir. With minimal prodding, he explained the difference between the Pinot grapes of California and of Burgundy: "The profile of a Pinot Noir is so specific, both in terms of the potency of sunshine and what we call the 'barnyard character' of the grape varieties." He swirled his glass, closed his eyes, and inhaled. "It gives me the sensation and the memory of a basket of mushrooms that have just been picked from a really dank forest."

He talked about his trajectory: "I was kind of in limbo in high school, in between these cultures and communities. And what I adopted from the white people, I guess, was the sense of possibility." After a semester at the University of Oregon, Satterfield dropped out and enrolled in culinary school in Portland; Burch's parents co-signed his student loan. Living in a cheap apartment building that turned out to be full of heroin addicts, he supplemented his classes with "self-guided studies" in food and wine. He read every good book that he could find at Powell's, took classes at the International Sommelier Guild, and talked his way into simultaneous jobs at exclusive venues. At the four-star Benson Hotel, he started as a room-service coördinator in a basement workspace, then rose to sommelier, holding daily tastings in the foyer.

Still, he was an anomaly in the overwhelmingly white wine world. At one tasting, an elderly woman asked him, "Are you even allowed to be here?" As he began reading about apartheid and its legacies, he decided, "I didn't have the luxury not to think about it. I took terroir—food, culture, wine—and pivoted to the politics of the land." In 2008, with a grant from the South African trade department, he visited the wine country of the Western Cape. After talking to several dozen women who were unable to advance in the industry, he had a vision: "I wanted to build a nonprofit training center for Black winemakers."



"I'd rather you sit where your positions are clearly marked."

He had no idea how to set up a business, but, he said, "I could just figure shit out." He approached a high-school friend whose father was an attorney, and the firm agreed to help with the paperwork. The timing was vexed: just as he started the project, he turned on CNN in his hotel room and learned that Lehman Brothers had crashed. He kept at it for two years, but the recession, along with industry regulations, proved insurmountable. Satterfield bounced back by moving to San Francisco and heading to one of the city's most popular gathering places: Nopa, a farm-to-table restaurant that emphasizes what it calls "honest food," well-curated wines, and "a diverse community of guests." Jeff Hanak, one of the owners, hired Satterfield as a sommelier. In his free time, he volunteered at a garden at Ida B. Wells High, a school for underprivileged kids. "Many of them had never seen anything come out of the ground," he told me. " 'This is a radish,' I would say."

Satterfield described Hanak as a "hard-ass from South San Francisco's blue-collar population," and as the best restaurateur he's ever met. Hanak showed him how to run an ecologically and socially conscious food business; he showed Hanak the emerging possibilities of social media. Satterfield started a blog, Nopalize, about local food culture, and when Instagram launched, in 2010, he immediately began posting. "O.K., cool," Hanak told him. "Play around with it." In the next five years, Nopalize grew to include a staff of correspondents, two filmmakers, a designer, a wine digest, and a podcast. "I was just hustling," Satterfield said. "I was leveraging access at the hottest restaurant to get people to work below their market value."

Finally, Hanak took Satterfield aside and pointed out that Nopa was paying his salary while he was effectively running his own business. Hanak asked what he really wanted to do. He replied, "I want to do exactly what I've been doing for Nopa—but, instead of covering Northern California, I want to cover the world." He had in mind a food-and-travel magazine, called *Whetstone*, that would center on "origin foraging"—stories about the unheralded people, places, and cultures behind every imaginable food. Nopa gave him five thousand dollars to have a logo designed. And then, he said, "they kicked me out of the restaurant."

One of Satterfield's favorite subjects in "High on the Hog" appears in the third episode: Thomas Downing, a free Black man from Virginia's Eastern Shore who began harvesting oysters in the Hudson in the eighteen-twenties and eventually became known as the Oyster King of New York. The owner of the damask-curtained, chandelier-hung Downing's Oyster House, at 5 Broad Street, he entertained bankers, lawyers, businessmen, and society women. In a basement where he stored fresh oysters, he and his son also hid fugitive slaves. He died a wealthy man, in 1866. For the show, Satterfield visited Bed-Stuy, where a young man named Ben Harney, continuing Downing's legacy, served oysters on the half shell from a cart called the Real MotherShuckers. Harney often had to convince Black first-timers that oysters are not élitist, telling them, "There's nothing that's not our thing." One customer was pleasantly surprised: "Tastes like outside, like the ocean."

Satterfield's encompassing tastes have been an advantage. When he started out, he said, "chefs were not really literate about wine, and somms were much less literate about food. So I was able to use my love of both to advance my career. My confidence, in a bizarre way, comes from being other, and from being comfortable with myself not being clearly of any of the worlds that raised me."

After reading David W. Blight's "Race and Reunion," an account of how white Americans betrayed the promise of Reconstruction, Satterfield concluded that Black history has always been regarded "either as dangerous or as not part of the American story." He aimed to help retrieve and shape those narratives, observing the maxim "Whoever tells the story owns it."

He worked tirelessly for three years to establish *Whetstone*. Two crowdfunding campaigns yielded barely four thousand dollars—enough to print two hundred copies. At first, his contributors wrote and photographed for free. People told him he was crazy. *Gourmet* had folded, *Saveur* was struggling, and David Chang's *Lucky Peach* was about to go bust after six years. There were no other Black American publishers of food magazines. The media, he said, was "designed to keep people like me out." Still, he was confident that readers would pay for a magazine that offered an alternative approach to food, as long as it was enticing enough. "Beauty is really powerful when you're trying to persuade people," he said.

The difficulties of launching a magazine were compounded by agonizing personal losses. In 2017, Satterfield's podcasting buddy, Franklin Clary, died in a car accident. The next year, Debby

Zygielbaum, his story editor, was driving through Napa Valley when a truck hit her car, killing her. Satterfield called Layla Schlack, an editor at *Wine Enthusiast*, and said, "I'm lost. I don't think I can continue this." She told him, "I got you, don't worry."

The first issue of *Whetstone* included articles and photo-essays about the Marrakech medina, where the author sampled snails in a fragrant *ras el hanout* broth; a sustainable-farming workshop on the Mendocino coast; and an award-winning coffee farm in the mountains of Colombia. Satterfield sold the initial print run by hand. A friend of his told me, "He was always carrying around ten issues in his backpack, showing them to everyone he met." Satterfield made visits to wine shops and independent bookstores. "I got a satchel and went door to door," he said. Wherever he found a flicker of interest, he offered a subscription—"for four issues, even though we only had one."

In the spring of 2019, when Satterfield was thirty-three, he got a call from a filmmaker named Fabienne Toback. She explained that she and her creative partner, Karis Jagger, had bought the rights to Harris's "High on the Hog," and that Roger Ross Williams, an Oscar-winning documentarian, had agreed to join as a director and executive producer. The book had profoundly shaped Satterfield's approach to African American food history, and he thought that Toback wanted to talk about how to popularize Harris's ideas: "I'm, like, 'Oh, yes, Fabienne, whatever you need me to do.'" It took several conversations for him to grasp that she wanted him to be the host.

Satterfield didn't have the swagger of conventional celebrity chefs; instead, he brought humility and vulnerability. On one early shoot, the showrunner Shoshana Guy took him aside and said, "Hey, listen, I need you to stand up a little bit." But Toback and Jagger saw his inexperience as an asset. "He's a great listener, and well respected in the food world," Jagger said. "We wanted someone who had deep knowledge, sensitivity, and elegance."

In an episode called "Our Founding Chefs," one scene takes place in Thomas Jefferson's kitchen at Monticello. Satterfield holds a colander for the scholar Leni Sorensen while she drains a copper pot of macaroni boiled in milk and water. Sorensen, who got a Ph.D. in American studies when she was sixty-three, is cooking a dish associated with an enslaved man named James Hemings, whom Jefferson brought to Paris during his ambassadorial years and apprenticed to a series of exceptional chefs. After their return, Hemings made the food at Monticello famous. He used creamy sauces and exotic spices such as cloves, nutmeg, and allspice—and often prepared macaroni and cheese for Jefferson and his guests. When Hemings demanded his freedom, Jefferson insisted that he first train his younger brother, which took two years. Hemings moved to Baltimore, and declined an offer to cook for Jefferson in the White House. He drank heavily, and died at thirty-six.

"High on the Hog" was a daunting television project: conveying the searing hardships of the Black experience alongside the vicarious pleasures of travelling and eating. Jagger was wary of being didactic—of "coming down on the themes like a hammer." She and Toback marked every page of Harris's book with notes, then selected the stories that they thought were indispensable. Williams broke the narrative into four visually alluring episodes, opening with slavery and ending with emancipation—hoping, he said, that "this would guarantee another season." Even thoroughly culled, the material was too dense for the screen, Williams said: "I go into the editing room, there's so much information and talking. I strip it all out. The style of the show has to be slow, quiet, powerful."

The first episode, "Our Roots," begins with Harris, then seventy-one, shepherding Satterfield through the teeming Dantokpa Market in Cotonou, Benin. It is Satterfield's first trip to Africa, and sometimes she holds his hand. Picking up an enormous object, which she says looks like a "hairy elephant foot," she explains that it's an African yam—not to be confused with an American sweet potato.

The two make their way to the Door of No Return in Ouidah, formerly one of West Africa's busiest slave-trading ports, where Harris tells Satterfield about the horrors that took place there. After a long march from the interior, enslaved people were kept in holding pens, vulnerable to disease and starvation. Those who didn't survive were likely buried in mass graves. On the transatlantic crossing, prisoners were fed "slabber sauce": flour, palm oil, and pepper. "So much of that story is the gruesome details you just provided. But the latter half of that story," Satterfield says, "is the story of our resilience." Then he bursts into tears. Williams was crying, too—so intensely, he told me, that "Fabienne had her hand over my mouth, and I had mine over hers. The *security guards* broke down."

Through the series, Satterfield became an emotional proxy for people of



color everywhere; many white Americans saw him as a reflective eyewitness to a past that they'd never grappled with. The food is a vehicle for remembrance, and occasionally for comic relief. He is served braised rabbit and wood-roasted carrots over grits at Hatchet Hall, in Los Angeles—an "ode to James Hemings," the chef says. Satterfield joins an al-fresco dinner of poulet-rouge hens and hickory-smoked-beet corn bread at a farm in North Carolina, whose owners expect that it will soon be seized under eminent domain. In Texas, he ventures out on a trail ride with Black cowboys, who razz him about being a novice. Satterfield, astride a docile filly named Liz, is uneasy but game: his long legs hanging low in the stirrups, he asks, "What do I tell Liz to get going?" That evening, he joins the cowboys around a campfire and smiles as he works through a bowlful of half-raw cow organs: an undercooked Son of a Gun Stew.

Satterfield has been in motion since he left home in his teens, and this May he made another move: to New York, where he and Oviedo had found a Brooklyn sublet. We had dinner one evening in Harlem, at BLVD Bistro, six blocks north of where Central Park West becomes Frederick Douglass Boulevard. The chef and owner, Carlos Swepson, greeted Satterfield warmly. Born in Natchez, Mississippi, Swepson moved with his parents to New Jersey as a child and started cooking under the tutelage of his mother and grandmother. He acquired the space for BLVD from another migrant: the celebrity chef Marcus Samuelsson, who was born in Ethiopia and raised in Sweden before opening a series of restaurants in New York.

Baskets of hot corn bread and biscuits soon appeared, followed by fried chicken, barbecued short ribs, potato salad, candied sweet potatoes, and smoked-turkey collards. Catfish was on the menu, but Swepson waved aside my question about spaghetti, saying that he'd had it back in Natchez but didn't serve it in his restaurant. Satterfield ate appreciatively, with one pedagogic aside: the short ribs, topped with barbecue sauce, were Texan, not Southeastern.

Swepson returned, to ask after our meals and to talk about how "High on the Hog" had moved him. "I feel like I know you," he told Satterfield, then said that he was writing a memoir, about his obstacle-strewn path to success. Satterfield gave him his phone number.

He is sometimes uneasy with his growing stardom in the food world. "I'm trying to use everything I've learned to put it back into the community," he told me. But the two businesses he knows best are troubled: restaurants were devastated by COVID-19, and legacy media is shrinking fast. Like his father taking the measure of Gary in the nineteen-seventies, Satterfield is thinking about how to adapt. His company, Whetstone Media, now includes a podcasting arm, Whetstone Radio Collective, and a culinary talent agency, Hone. He is also writing a book, "Black Terroir," to be published by HarperCollins. It starts in Georgia, where his mother's ancestors were enslaved on the Weaver cotton plantation, continues with his father's upbringing in Gary, and explores the "gastro-politics of place."



He admits that he's made some costly mistakes, expanding rapidly while spreading himself thin. Podcasting is not known for its lucrative returns, but last year he hired six new employees for Whetstone Radio. He said, "It was arrogant—to put it out and think that they'll come." The company lost half a million dollars, and he had to let six people go. "I'm trying to find a balance," he said. "I've learned how to raise, make, and burn money."

Like other Black Americans familiar with the country's history, Satterfield knows that after every period of progress there is a retreat. "We remember the times of disruption—1865, 1964, 2020—because of what comes next," he said. "We're now in a moment when we ask, Did we actually gain ground?" He doesn't expect the forthcoming coverage of the show to be quite so adulatory: "Black season is over." The Nigerian chef Tunde Wey made the same point to me. Wey is known in the U.S. for pop-up dining events at which he sparked conversations about income inequality by charging Black participants a fraction of what he asked whites to pay. He said, of Satterfield, "Having him be a host on a food show, an African American man, in itself was quite a victory." But, since the series was released, "the appetite, in print and on TV, for all things Black, for social justice—that shit has dried up." Wey mentioned a Malaysian British food writer and a Puerto Rican journalist in California who told him that they were again having trouble selling their stories. "That moment has quieted," the writer Osayi Endolyn said. "We've seen some people get hired. That's great. They're where they're supposed to be. But it becomes the justification for taking the foot off the gas."

In "The Big Sea," published in 1940, Langston Hughes wrote about the complexities of courting mass approval. In a chapter about the Harlem Renaissance, "When the Negro Was in Vogue," he noted that patrons flocked to the Cotton Club, but he never went, "because the Cotton Club was a Jim Crow club for gangsters and monied whites." In mixed clubs, "the strangers were given the best ringside tables to sit and stare at the Negro customers—like amusing animals in a zoo." Satterfield's most prized books are first editions of Hughes's work, and he reveres the period of creativity that Hughes exemplified. (The new episodes of "High on the Hog" are inspired by the Harlem Renaissance, along with the Great Migration and the civil-rights movement.) Still, he is impatient with misplaced nostalgia: "Harlem is a brand name. People hold on to that period, in that ten-block radius, the way others hold on to a nonexistent past."

As Satterfield sees it, history is a cautionary guide to the future. He still keeps a journal, opening a fresh page each month for notes and poems. The entries for May include a plan for adapting Whetstone to the "new media environment." There is a broader goal, too—of using entrepreneurship to "help my people get more free." Thomas Downing proved that it could be done: at a time when most African Americans were enslaved, he forced his way into whites-only fine dining by making oysters glamorous. Still, Satterfield understands the hazards of the current era. "The forest is burning," he said. "Whether or not it's a controlled burn—bringing back the nutrients—or starting all over again is unclear." But, he said emphatically, "I don't like to lose." ♦



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LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

PARTICIPATION TROPHY

BY SIMON RICH

I'll never forget the day we met. You were dressed boldly, in orthopedic Velcro shoes, yellow sweatpants, and an oversized Legend of Zelda T-shirt. You completed the ensemble with a green mesh pinny, which you debonairly or mistakenly wore as a necklace, your head thrust fetchingly through an armhole. I was young then. Fresh out of my bulk-order box. I can see myself now as I must have looked to you on that spring day: a gleaming figurine of indeterminate age and gender, gazing alluringly from my plastic podium, my lithe limbs splayed in a vaguely athletic pose, perhaps running, perhaps swimming, or maybe even doing a non-sports thing, like dancing or debate. In any case, my body glinted in the sun like gold.

Although you had signed up for only one event that Field Day—a relay race in which you ran in the wrong direction—you never questioned my presence in your life. When Ms. Musgrove handed me to you and said, "You tried your best," you pumped both fists in triumph. I'll never forget how you caressed me with your gentle, Yoo-hoo-scented hands. When you held me to your chest, I could feel your heart pounding, and, though I knew that it was partly because your body was so unused to exercise, I sensed that there was also something more powerful at play.

On the bus ride back from Randall's Island, you held me on your lap, completely smitten. You carefully sounded out the words engraved on me—"If you had fun, you won"—and, though your reaction was muted at first, you eventually figured out that the sentence rhymed, which sent you into ecstasy. I remember how you laughed hysterically, tears streaming down your face, as you repeated the rhyme to yourself, and then to the other children on the bus, to make sure that they also knew about the rhyme.

When you got home, you whisked me to your room and put me in a place of honor, next to your *Mad* magazines on a high bookshelf.

Then your brother got home from his bar-mitzvah lesson. And, between bites of his intimidatingly sour candy, he told you that our love was a lie.

"It's not a real trophy," he said. "They give it to everyone, whether they're good at sports or not. They even give it to kids who are—" and then he said a word

that isn't said anymore but that you both used to say constantly.

He told you that I was "cheap" and "made in China," and that I wasn't, as you'd somehow assumed, made out of real gold.

You defended me as best you could, but when he left I could tell that something had changed between us. Your brother had taken me off your shelf for demonstration purposes. Now that he was gone, you didn't put me back.

Years passed. And, with the exception of one afternoon during puberty when you became curious about my butt, you moved on. I was banished to a crate inside your closet. Meanwhile, you went off to prep school, in search of more glamorous conquests. First came those waifish science-fair certificates, dressed up in their showy, gilded borders. Then that buxom chess cup, with its obscenely leering mouth. By the time you graduated from high school, there were Latin plaques and honor pins and a slew of whorish Model U.N. gavels stacked up on the shelf I'd once called home.

If you spoke of me at all, it was with ridicule. "Remember participation trophies?" you'd scoff. "Those were so—" and then you'd say that word which people don't say anymore but which you continued to say for longer than most people did.

You went off to college, where your taste grew even more refined. You were after high-class trophies now, medals made out of real metal, or whose names were at least searchable on Wikipedia. After graduation, you had your diploma framed, and you set out lustfully into the world.

Your twenties were a blur of striving, writing for TV. And, though "The Daily Show" pretty much won every award every year, you managed to win a few trophies and some obscure plaques for, like, books and stuff. But there were always bigger awards to win, so you kept pushing, even after your children were born. And sometimes they would run into your office, in their Velcro shoes and oversized T-shirts, and try to play with your trophies by making them kiss each other. And, as you ushered the kids out of your office, you wondered if participation trophies still existed. You doubted it, but you couldn't be completely sure, because you didn't attend many of their athletic events. The school was kind of far away, and you were busy.

Then, one day, you heard your children running down the hall, and you sighed, dreading the inevitable interruption. But, instead of barging into your office like always, they ran right by, and you felt a sharp pang, like someone discovering, in the middle of a relay race, that he'd been running in the wrong direction.

You thought about the picture books you'd flipped through two pages at a time, the half-assed baths and phoned-in Hokey Pokeys, the fake trips to the bathroom at that birthday party, writing notes to yourself in a dank Chuck E. Cheese stall. And it wasn't just the kids, it was everything—the offensively generic anniversary cards, the increasingly baffling text chain with your college friends, the disturbingly corporate guest list for your birthday party, the sand in your laptop and the unused snorkel, the decades marked by milestones rather than by memories. And it occurred to you that maybe, all this time, instead of ignoring life, or scavenging it for material, you should have . . . what's the word I'm looking for?

Oh, yeah. *Participated.*

Maybe what we had was real. Maybe it's the rest of your life that's been—I won't say the word, but you know the one I mean. And now you're not young anymore. Your surface is peeling, your figure is drooping. Unlike me, you're biodegradable.

But here's what's so messed up about me: even though you spurned me, mocked me, and, on that day I mentioned during puberty, confused the hell out of me, I haven't given up on you.

I know we won't be reunited. You're in L.A., and I'm in a landfill, buried under four hundred tons of WOW potato chips. You could search for a million years and never find me. But maybe you can find the part of yourself that you left behind on Randall's Island, the part that was present and grounded and found joy in a rhyme that barely worked.

Through your office door, you can hear the muffled tap of little feet. You're behind, but the race isn't over. For God's sake, turn around. Pass the baton. Go out there and prove yourself worthy of my love. ♦

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THE CONTROL OF NATURE

ROOT AND BRANCH

What we owe our trees.

BY JILL LEPORE



The woods I know best, love best, are made of Northern hardwoods, sugar maple and white ash, timber-tall; black and yellow birch, tiger-skinned; seedlings and saplings of blighted beech and striped maple creeping up, knock-kneed, from a forest floor of princess pine and Christmas fern, shag-rugged. White-tailed deer dart through softwood stands of pine and hemlock, bucks and does, the last leaping fawn, leaving tracks that look like tiny human lungs, trails that people can only ever see in the snow, even though, long after snowmelt, dogs can smell them, tracking, snuffling, shuddering with the thrill of the hunt and noshing on deer scat for dog treats. I make lists of finds, two-winged, four-footed, and rolling: black-throated green warblers and blue-headed vireos, porcupines and salamanders, tin cans and old tires, deer mice and fisher cats, wild turkeys and ruffed grouse, black bears and, come spring, their tumbling, potbellied, big-eared cubs.

Even if you haven't been to the woods lately, you probably know that the forest is disappearing. In the past ten thousand years, the Earth has lost about a third of its forest, which wouldn't be so worrying if it weren't for the fact that almost all that loss has happened in the past three hundred years or so. As much forest has been lost in the past hundred years as in the nine thousand before. With the forest go the worlds within those woods, each habitat and dwelling place, a universe within each rotting log, a galaxy within a pine cone. And, unlike earlier losses of forests, owing to ice and fire, volcanoes, comets, and earthquakes—actuarially acts of God—nearly all the destruction in the past three centuries has been done deliberately, by people, actuarially at fault: cutting down trees to harvest wood, plant crops, and graze animals.

The Earth is about four and a half billion years old. By about two and a half billion years ago, enough oxygen had built up in the atmosphere to support multicellular life, and by about five hundred and seventy million years ago the first complex macroscopic organisms had begun to appear, as Peter Frankopan reports in "The Earth Transformed" (Knopf), an essential epic that runs from the dawn of time to, oh, six o'clock yesterday. In his not at all cheerful conclusion, looking to a possibly not too distant future in which humans fail to address climate change and become extinct, Frankopan writes, "Our loss will be the gain of other animals and plants." An upside!

The first trees evolved about four hundred million years ago, and pretty quickly, geologically speaking, they covered most of the Earth's dry land. A hundred and fifty million years later, during a mass-extinction event known as the Great Dying, the forests perished, along with nearly everything else on land and sea. Then, two million years after that, the supercontinent broke up, a seismic process whose consequences included depositing oil, coal, and natural gas in the places on the planet where they can still be found, to our enrichment and ruination. The trees returned. The ginkgo is the oldest surviving tree species, its fan-shaped leaves unfurling lime green in spring and falling, mustard yellow, in autumn.

The first primates showed up about fifty-five million years ago, in the rain forest. They lived in the trees. Our ancestors began dividing from apes—began, slowly, coming down from the trees—about seven million years ago; the genus *Homo* branched off four million years later; and *Homo sapiens* began wandering around the understory somewhere

That clear-cutting can be counteracted by tree planting is an industry myth.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROBERT ADAMS

FRAENKEL GALLERY

between eight hundred thousand and two hundred thousand years ago, although exactly when is apparently a matter of fierce debate, which seems right, since humans are such a contentious, Neanderthal-killing lot. Here's how Frankopan, a professor of global history at Oxford, puts it: "Like rude house guests who arrive at the last minute, cause havoc and set about destroying the house to which they have been invited, human impact on the natural environment has been substantial and is accelerating to the point that many scientists question the long-term viability of human life." Climate change contributed to the extinction of Neanderthals about thirty-five thousand years ago, but humans, instead of dying out, migrated to different climates, or found other ways to survive, which generally involved controlling fire and burning fallen sticks and branches for heat and to cook otherwise hard-to-digest food, or making axes to cut down trees, whose wood could be used to build shelters and, later, fences for animals. They cut and felled. Knopf printed about twenty thousand copies of Frankopan's seven-hundred-page book on paper made from trees. I read it sitting in a house built of pine in a chair made of maple at a desk made of oak holding a pencil made of cedar. They cut and felled. The wood in my woodstove is yellow birch, burning, bark curling.

"If you think about it, a tree is a tricky place in which to live," the biologist Roland Ennos writes in "The Age of Wood" (Scribner). Ennos argues that dividing human history into the Stone Age (beginning two and a half million years ago), the Bronze Age (3000–1000 B.C.E.), and the Iron Age (1200–300 B.C.E.)—a scheme invented in the nineteenth century by a Danish antiquarian—misses the earliest and most important era, the Wood Age.

People are arboreal, at least vestigially, Ennos points out, with binocular vision, upright posture, hind limbs for movement, forelimbs for gripping, and fingers with soft pads and nails, all features that evolved to help primates live in trees. The first primates were as small as mice, and could scramble wherever they liked, but, as they got bigger, it became harder to stay up in the trees, where it was safest, especially at night. A "clambering hypothesis," among primatologists, has it that the thinking of great apes got more sophisticated—they developed a "self-reflective psychology"—so that they could better understand the mechanics of climbing and swinging through trees. Also, the first tools used by great apes were made of trees and in trees: nests for sleeping in higher branches. (The bigger your brain, the more REM sleep you need.) The earliest hominins who learned to walk upright did so while still living, mainly, in trees, and they came down at night only after figuring out how to make fires—with wood. That had all kinds of knock-on effects, including being able to cook food, which makes it easier for us to get energy out of it, and made it possible for our brains to grow bigger. Hominins came down from the trees, built huts, made fires, and no longer needed their fur, so they lost it, which meant that when the weather, or the climate, got colder they needed warmer huts and more fires, but with those they could go anywhere, as long as there were trees. As for making tools, they mainly used not stone but wood, and when they did use stone it was often to make better tools out of wood. You could use a stone, for instance, to sharpen a wooden spear, a tool you could wield to kill beasts of land and sea.

In all this time, people did not run out of wood, since there weren't that many people and there were a great many trees, and because trees grow back. Even after humans invented the stone axe and began to chop down trees, this was still true. Chopping and burning, they cleared openings in forests to attract game, and they adzed trunks and limbs into poles and posts, planks and beams. They built houses and rafts and boats, and some people, in places where they had cleared the forests, began to farm. During the ages of stone, bronze, and iron, down through the early modern era, Ennos writes, "almost all the possessions of everyday folk were wooden, while those that were not actually made of wood needed large quantities of wood to produce." Only the turn to coal for fuel in the eighteenth century and to wrought iron for building in the nineteenth, he argues, brought about the end of the age of wood. Except that it didn't exactly end, since imperialism, industrialism, and capitalism meant that people were more likely to go to war and conquer land in order to cut down other people's trees.

You could tell this story about a lot of places, but consider England and its North American colonies. By the eighteenth century, much of England and in fact much of Western Europe had been deforested, but England needed timber to build ships in order to trade goods, wage war, and found colonies. It especially wanted very tall and straight pines, for ships' masts. During the long wars between Britain and France, often fought at sea, France had for a time a ship's-mast advantage, having cut a path known as the Mast Road through the Pyrenees to a stand of tall fir trees. Britain harvested its masts from its colonies, and especially from the tall white pines of New England, having issued an edict, in 1691, that any pine whose trunk, when measured a foot from the ground, was more than twenty-four inches in diameter belonged to the King (later revised, fairly desperately, to twelve inches in diameter). Among the many causes of the American Revolution was the Pine Tree Riot of 1772, when New Hampshire mill owners refused to pay fines for sawing pine trees into boards.

One of the earliest alarms about deforestation written in English is "Sylva, or a Discourse on Forest-Trees, and the Propagation of Timber of His Majesties Dominions," by Sir John Evelyn, published in London in 1664. Evelyn called for tree planting as an act of patriotism, and if he was the first to do so he was not the last, as the University of Oregon geographer Shaul E. Cohen reported in his book "Planting Nature: Trees and the Manipulation of Environmental Stewardship in America" (2004). Writing about forests, John Perlin urges humans to "stop our war against them" in a new edition of his 1989 book, "A Forest Journey: The Role of Trees in the Fate of Civilization" (Patagonia), more than five hundred pages but "printed on 100 percent postconsumer paper." Yet any plans for a truce in this war, including calls for planting trees, have often been pretty suspect, perhaps especially so in the United States.

American states legislated the protection of the forests from the start, if to little effect. After the Revolution, for instance, Massachusetts forbade the cutting down of those twenty-four-inch

white pines on any public lands. But in the Western territories "public lands," which were generally the unceded ancestral homelands of tribal nations, quickly became private lands. After the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, Congress paid Revolutionary War veterans in plots of land in the Northwest Territory, north of the Ohio River. ("The utmost good faith shall always be observed towards the Indians; their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent; and, in their property, rights and liberty, they shall never be invaded or disturbed, unless in just and lawful wars authorized by Congress," Congress affirmed in the Ordinance, in a pledge not honored.) In Conrad Richter's 1940 historical novel, "The Trees," a family from Pennsylvania treks to the Ohio Valley around 1787. Their little girl, looking down from a hilltop, is overwhelmed by her first view of the forest, thinking that "what lay beneath was the late sun glittering on green-black water," mistaking for an ocean what was, instead, "a sea of solid treetops broken only by some gash where deep beneath the foliage an unknown stream made its way." The whole of Richter's trilogy, the story of American pioneers, is the story of clearing the woods: "Oh, it was hard beating back the woods. You had to fight the wild trees and their sprouts tooth and nail." By the trilogy's end, that little girl, now an old woman, is haunted by regret. "She reckoned she knew now how one of those old butts in the deep woods felt when all its fellows were cut down and it was left standing lone and gaunt against the sky, with only whips and brush and those not worth the axe pushing up around it. The second growth trees you saw today were mighty poor and spindly specimens beside the giants she had known when first she came to this country."



A sense that the great clearing meant, as well, a great loss pervaded nineteenth-century American culture. Much of it was romance, a product of the wispy, dreamy, self-justifying association many Americans made between the vanishing forest and the imagined vanishing of the Indians, even while the federal and state governments pursued a policy of conquest and war against Native nations. Tree-planting campaigns became the called-for, remorseful remedy. "If our ancestors found it wise and necessary to cut down fast forests, it is all the more needful that their descendants should plant trees," the landscape architect Andrew Jackson Downing wrote in 1847. "Let every man, whose soul is not a desert, plant trees." That same year, George Perkins Marsh gave a lecture in Rutland, Vermont, that helped launch the conservation movement. Marsh argued that the destruction of the forests had consequences for the climate: "Though man cannot at his pleasure command the rain and the sunshine, the wind and frost and snow, yet it is certain that climate itself has in many instances been gradually changed and ameliorated or deteriorated by human action." He went on:

> The draining of swamps and the clearing of forests perceptibly effect the evaporation from the earth, and of course the mean quantity of moisture suspended in the air. The same causes modify the electrical condition of the atmosphere and the power of the surface to reflect, absorb and radiate the rays of the sun, and consequently influence the distribution of light and heat, and the force and direction of the winds. Within narrow limits too, domestic fires and artificial structures create and diffuse increased warmth, to an extent that may effect vegetation.

Marsh insisted, "Trees are no longer what they were in our fathers' time, an incumbrance." They are, instead, a reservoir, the source of life, the regulators of the climate.

Marsh, a linguist and a diplomat, went on to write a groundbreaking book, "The Earth as Modified by Human Action," first published in 1864 under the title "Man and Nature," a nineteenth-century version of Frankopan's "The Earth Transformed." The Wisconsin legislature in 1867 commissioned an investigation that resulted in the publication of its "Report on the Disastrous Effects of the Destruction of Forest Trees, Now Going On So Rapidly in the State of Wisconsin." The state then inaugurated a program of tax exemption for landowners who planted trees. In 1873, the Nebraska senator Phineas W. Hitchcock introduced the Timber Culture Act, declaring, "The object of this bill is to encourage the growth of timber, not merely for the benefit of the soil, not merely for the value of timber itself, but for its influence upon the climate." The act, a failure, was repealed in 1891. Instead, the lasting consequence of Marsh's "The Earth as Modified by Human Action" was Arbor Day, created by a Nebraskan named J. Sterling Morton and first celebrated on April 10, 1872.

Morton, the editor of the Nebraska City *News*, called for a day "set apart and consecrated for tree planting." On that first Arbor Day, Nebraskans planted more than a million trees. The holiday soon spread, especially after Grover Cleveland appointed Morton as his Secretary of Agriculture, in 1892. The advocacy organization American Forests was founded in 1875, and, as Cohen writes, it also advanced the idea that planting a tree was an act of citizenship. This was a tradition that faltered at various times in the twentieth century but was renewed beginning in 1970 with the first Earth Day (also held in April) and with the establishment of the National Arbor Day Foundation two years later. Its many programs include Trees for America; pay a membership fee, and you get ten saplings in the mail. American Forests runs Global ReLeaf.

But Cohen and other critics have argued that there is little evidence that these programs do much more than greenwash bad actors. American Forests has been sponsored by both fossil fuel and timber companies. In 1996, the climate-change-denying G.O.P. encouraged Republican congressional candidates to have themselves photographed planting a tree. "10 Reasons to Plant Trees with American Forests," printed in 2001, suggests that "planting 30 trees each year offsets the average American's 'carbon debt'—the amount of carbon dioxide you produce each year from your car and home." The E.P.A., on a Web site that linked to American Forests, urged Americans to plant trees as penance: "Plant some trees and stop feeling guilty." What with one thing and another, have you used ten thousand kilowatt-hours of electricity? The site offered indulgences: plant ten trees, one for every thousand kilowatt-

hours. At the height of the corporate tree-atonement era, a *New Yorker* cartoon showed a queue of businessmen waiting to see a guru, with one saying to another, "It's great! You just tell him how much pollution your company is responsible for and he tells you how many trees you have to plant to atone for it."

The notion that clear-cutting can be counteracted by the planting of trees is a political product of the timber industry. As Cohen shows, the phrase "tree farm" was coined by a publicist at a timber company, as was the motto "Timber Is a Crop." And the notion hasn't died. In 2020, the World Economic Forum announced its sponsorship of an initiative called 1t, a corporate-funded plan to "conserve, restore, and grow" one trillion trees by the year 2030. At Davos in 2020, Donald Trump pledged American support. (At the time, the President mentioned that he was reading a book about the environmental movement; written by a former adviser of his, it was called "Donald J. Trump: An Environmental Hero.")

It's good to plant trees. No one's arguing any different. "There's no anti-tree lobby," a Nature Conservancy ecologist told *Science News* recently. Trees are the new polar bears, the trending face of the environmental movement. But it's not clear that planting a trillion trees is a solution. In terms of biodiversity, killing forests and planting tree farms isn't much help; a forest is an ecosystem, and a tree farm is a monoculture. Forests absorb about sixteen billion metric tons of carbon dioxide every year, but they also emit about eight billion tons. The main study behind the 1t movement proposes that planting trees on land around the world roughly equivalent in area to the United States will trap more than two hundred billion tons of carbon. Yet a forum published in *Science* in 2019 expressed grave skepticism about both the science and the math behind this plan. The history is fishy, too. National tree-planting schemes have, historically, come up short. Studies across countries have found that as many as nine in ten saplings planted under these auspices die. They're the wrong kind of tree. No one waters them. They're planted at the wrong time of year. They have not improved forest cover. The 1t folks make a point of saying that they're not planting trees; they're growing them. But whether they really are remains to be seen.

In the meantime, you are asked to think differently about trees. They're out there. They're smart. They will outlast us. Brian Selznick's graphic children's novel "Big Tree" (Scholastic) tells the story of trees across tens of millions of years, through the trials of two sycamores: "Once upon a time, there were two little seeds in a very old forest. Their mama said she would give them roots and wings—roots so they'd always have a home, and wings so they would be brave enough to find it." Selznick's understanding of forestry, and maternal trees, borrows from the work of the Canadian ecologist Suzanne Simard. As a young scientist, Simard was the lead author of a study published in *Nature*, "Net Transfer of Carbon Between Ectomycorrhizal Tree Species in the Field," in which she reported the findings of a years-long series of experiments that she conducted with seedlings. "Plants within communities can be interconnected and exchange resources through a common hyphal network, and form guilds based on their shared mycorrhizal associates," she concluded. That is to say, plants can communicate with one another chemically, and across species, issuing warnings, for instance. Put in human terms, trees can care for one another. Simard came to call certain of these signallers "mother trees," which both got her into hot water and made her beloved. Although subsequent research verified most of her major findings, she was for a long time chastised by scientists, an experience that was the inspiration for the trials of Patricia Westerford in Richard Powers's intricate Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, "The Overstory," from 2018. In the novel, Powers describes the moment of Westerford's crucial finding, in a forest of sugar maples:

> The trees under attack pump out insecticides to save their lives. That much is uncontroversial. But something else in the data makes her flesh pucker: trees a little way off, untouched by the invading swarms, ramp up their own defenses when their neighbor is attacked. Something *alerts* them. They get wind of the disaster, and they prepare. She controls for everything she can, and the results are always the same. Only one conclusion makes any sense: The wounded trees send out alarms that other trees smell. Her maples are *signaling*.

Amy Adams is slated to play Simard in an upcoming film adaptation of Simard's memoir, "Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest" (Knopf).

Simard is herself something of a maternal spirit in Katie Holten's collection of essays, poems, and other snippets, "The Language of Trees" (Tin House), in which Holten, an Irish artist and activist, introduces a tree alphabet. Each letter is represented by the striking silhouette of a tree: Apple, Beech, Cedar, Dogwood, Elm, and so on. The book reproduces a piece of Simard's writing: "When mother trees—the majestic hubs at the center of forest communication, protection, and sentience—die, they pass their wisdom to their kin, generation after generation, sharing the knowledge of what helps and what harms, who is friend or foe, and how to adapt and survive in an ever-changing landscape. It's what all parents do." That "mother," in Holten's abecedary, reads this way: Mulberry, Oak, Tree of heaven, Horse chestnut, Elm, Redwood.

Simard's research has also been popularized by a German forester named Peter Wohlleben in his best-selling 2015 book (first translated into English in 2016), "The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate." Wohlleben's earlier books were downers, like "The Forest: An Obituary." "The Hidden Life of Trees" is not a downer. Forget imperialism, industrialism, and capitalism. Think feelings. A forest of trees, Wohlleben argues, is like a herd of elephants. "Like the herd, they, too, look after their own, and they help their sick and weak back up onto their feet." Like elephants—like humans—trees have friends, and lovers, and parents and children. They have language, and they also have, he argues, a kind of sentience.

As science, the mothering, feeling tree is controversial. As literature for a political movement, it's not bad, and, after all, nothing else has worked—not Arbor Day, not the "Report on the Disastrous Effects of the Destruction of Forest Trees, Now Going On So Rapidly," not Global ReLeaf, not 1t. At this rate, unless humans think of something better fast, the forests, and then we who walk the Earth, two-legged, will be Dogwood, Elm, Apple, Dogwood. ♦

LETTER FROM UKRAINE

UNDERWORLD

The unrelenting horrors faced by infantrymen on the Zero Line.

BY LUKE MOGELSON



A twenty-two-year-old Ukrainian sniper, code-named Student, stuffed candy wrappers into his ears before firing a rifle at the



Russians' tree line. He'd been discharged from the hospital two weeks earlier, after being shot in the thigh.

Soldiers on the front in Ukraine adhere to a maxim that grows more sacrosanct the longer they survive: *If you want to live, dig.* In mid-March, I arrived at a small Army position in the eastern region of the Donbas, where shock waves and shrapnel had reduced the surrounding trees to splintered canes. Artillery had churned up so much earth that you could no longer distinguish between craters and the natural topography. Eight infantrymen were rebuilding a machine-gun nest that Russian shelling had obliterated the previous week, killing one of their comrades. A torn piece of a jacket, from a separate blast, hung on a branch high above us. A log-covered dugout, where the soldiers slept, was about five feet deep and not much wider. At the sound of a Russian helicopter, everyone squeezed inside. A direct hit from a mortar had charred the timber. To refortify the structure, new logs had been stacked over the burned ones. Ukrainian soldiers often employ netting or other camouflage to evade drone surveillance, but here subterfuge would have been futile. Russian forces had already pinpointed the position and seemed determined to eradicate it. As for the infantrymen, their mission was straightforward: not to leave and not to die.

The helicopter deployed several rockets somewhere up the tree line. The soldiers climbed back into the light, found their shovels, and resumed working. One of them, called Syava, had a missing front tooth and wore a large combat knife on his belt. The others began mocking the knife as unsuitable for a modern industrial conflict.

"I'll give it to you as a gift after the war," Syava said.

" 'After the war'—so optimistic!"

Everybody laughed. On the front, to talk about the future, or to imagine experiencing a reality distinct from the baleful present, smacked of naïveté or hubris.

The term "infantry" derives from "infant," and was first applied to low-ranking foot soldiers in the sixteenth century. Five hundred years later, infantrymen remain the most disposable of troops. But in Ukraine they are also the most essential. Syava and his comrades belonged to an infantry battalion in the 28th Separate Mechanized Brigade, which had been fighting without respite for more than a year. The brigade was originally based near Odesa, the historic port city on the Black Sea. At the start of the invasion, Russian forces from Crimea, the southern peninsula that Vladimir Putin had annexed in 2014, failed to reach Odesa but did capture another coastal city, Kherson. The 28th Brigade was at the forefront of an ensuing campaign to liberate Kherson. For some six months, the Russians staved off the Ukrainians with a deluge of artillery and air strikes, exacting a devastating toll whose precise scale Ukraine has kept secret. Finally, in November, Russia withdrew across the Dnipro River. Battered members of the 28th Brigade were among the first Ukrainian troops to enter Kherson. Crowds greeted them there as heroes. Before they could recover, they were sent three hundred miles northeast, to the outskirts of Bakhmut, a besieged city that was becoming the scene of the most ferocious violence of the war.

Syava's battalion, which numbered about six hundred men, was posted on the edge of a village south of Bakhmut. The village was controlled by the Wagner Group, a Russian paramilitary organization notorious for committing atrocities in Africa and the Middle East. For the war in Ukraine, Wagner recruited thousands of inmates from Russian prisons by offering them pardons in exchange for combat tours. The onslaught of expendable convicts proved too much for the Ukrainians, who were still reeling from Kherson and had not yet replenished their ranks and matériel. The commander of the battalion, a thirty-nine-year-old lieutenant colonel named Pavlo, said of the Wagner fighters, "They were like zombies. They used the prisoners like a wall of meat. It didn't matter how many we killed—they kept coming."

Within weeks, the battalion faced annihilation: entire platoons had been wiped out in close-contact firefights, and some seventy men had been encircled and massacred. The dwindling survivors, one officer told me, "became useless because they were so tired." In January, what was left of the battalion retreated from the village and established defensive positions in the tree lines and open farmland a mile to the west. "Wagner kicked our asses," the officer said.

The Russian mercenaries subsequently left for Bakhmut, to shore up other forces there, and the conventional troops who replaced them were far less numerous and suicidal. By the time I joined the battalion, about two months had passed since it had lost the battle for the village, and during the interim neither side had attempted a major operation against the other. It was all the Ukrainians could do to maintain the stalemate. Pavlo estimated that, owing to the casualties his unit had sustained, eighty per cent of his men were new draftees. "They're civilians with no experience," he said. "If they give me ten, I'm lucky when three of them can fight."

We were in his bunker, which had been dug in the back yard of a half-demolished farmhouse; the constant rumble of artillery vibrated through the dirt walls. "A lot of the new guys don't have the stamina to be out here," Pavlo said. "They get scared and they panic." His military call sign was Cranky, and he was renowned for his temper, but he spoke sympathetically about his weaker soldiers and their fears. Even for him, a career officer of twenty-three years, this phase of the war had been harrowing.

On a road that passed in front of the farmhouse, a board had been nailed to a tree with the painted words "TO MOSCOW" and an arrow pointing east. No one knew who'd put it there. Such optimistic brio seemed to be a vestige of another time.

Just two of the soldiers who were rebuilding the machine-gun nest had been with the battalion since Kherson. One of them, a twenty-nine-year-old construction worker called Bison—because he was built like one—had been hospitalized three times: after being shot in the shoulder, after being wounded by shrapnel in the ankle and knee, and after being wounded by shrapnel in the back and arm. The other veteran, code-named Odesa, had enlisted in the Army in 2015, after dropping out of college. Short and stocky, he had the same serene deportment as Bison. The uncanny extent to which both men had adapted to their lethal environment underscored the ag-

itation of the recent arrivals, who flinched whenever something whistled overhead or crashed nearby.

"I only trust Bison," Odesa said. "If the new recruits run away, it will mean immediate death for us." He'd lost nearly all his closest friends in Kherson. Taking out his phone, he swiped through a series of photographs: "Killed . . . killed . . . killed . . . killed . . . killed . . . wounded. . . . Now I have to get used to different people. It's like starting over."

Because the high attrition rate had disproportionately affected the bravest and most aggressive soldiers—a phenomenon that one officer called "reverse natural selection"—seasoned infantrymen like Odesa and Bison were extremely valuable and extremely fatigued. After Kherson, Odesa had gone AWOL. "I was in a bad place psychologically," he said. "I needed a break." After two months of resting and recuperating at home, he came back. His return was prompted not by a fear of being punished—what were they going to do, put him in the trenches?—but by a sense of loyalty to his dead friends. "I felt guilty," he said. "I realized that my place was here."

Although the dugout where Bison and Odesa slept had become a target for Russian artillery, it was about four hundred yards behind the Zero Line—the trenches where infantrymen clashed directly with Russian forces. To reach the Zero Line, you had to traverse a barren valley pocked with mortar holes, where owls and pheasants sometimes burst from the scant underbrush, and then follow a densely wooded ravine that snaked eastward. Sleeping quarters had been constructed on the steep slope, but the ravine ran through a chalk vein, which inhibited digging. Some soldiers had used axes to hack into the white stone; others had cobbled together shelters with sandbags and branches.

The boundary of Ukrainian-held territory was marked with loops of barbed wire. Steps cut into the ravine ascended to an observation post behind a berm. One morning in March, a draftee I'll call Artem was there, peering through a periscope. From where he stood, an expanse of rotting sunflower stalks led to a tree line occupied by Russian soldiers. The distance was a few hundred yards.

During previous reporting trips to Ukraine, I had encountered the Russian military almost exclusively as a remote, invisible source of bombs that fell from the sky. It was eerie to look across such a short gap at an actual Russian position—and to know that an actual Russian might be looking back. Artem shared my unease. "I shouldn't be here," he said. "I'm not a soldier."

He was a forty-two-year-old father of three who managed a grain elevator in a small farming community in central Ukraine. Men who have three children are legally exempt from conscription but, in December, Artem was still in the process of adopting one of his daughters when he was summoned by his local draft board. A physician, citing a skull fracture that Artem had once suffered during an ice-skating accident, deemed him medically unfit to serve; the board dispatched him to a military training center anyway. His training lasted a month and consisted of tutorials and marching drills—"theoretical stuff, nothing practical." He shot a total of thirty rounds during two trips to a firing range. From the training center, Artem was assigned to the 28th Brigade, and a day after joining Pavlo's infantry battalion he was on the Zero Line.

"The first couple of weeks, I was so fucking scared," he said. "I ran whenever there was shooting." Gunshots and explosions gave him migraines, which exacerbated his anxiety. He'd been there for six weeks and had not so much mastered his fear as accepted the illogic of running: there was nowhere to escape to. All the same, he was so timid by nature that it was difficult to imagine him repulsing a Russian attack. "I hate weapons and violence," he said with wide-eyed incredulity, as if he still could not believe where he was. "I'm just trying to stay alive until I can get home."

A few minutes after I met Artem, a rocket-propelled grenade, or R.P.G., screamed across the sunflower field and detonated in the ravine. Machine-gun fire clattered, and bullets whacked the trees. I ducked behind a barricade of



sandbags, where the ranking sergeant—another veteran, like Bison and Odesa—was shouting at his subordinates.

"All good?"

His call sign was Tynda. He had a prim goatee and wore a jungle hat whose floppy brim was snapped up on the sides. I spent twelve days with the 28th Brigade, and I never once saw Tynda, Odesa, or Bison put on body armor or a helmet. When I asked Bison about this, he replied, "If I'm going to die, I'll die." Such fatalism was endemic in the infantry, but sometimes it conveyed a hard-earned wisdom: the veterans had so internalized the soundscape of the war that they knew instinctively where each munition was coming from and where it would land. While I was talking to Bison, on the edge of a field, he didn't even turn his head to watch as two shells exploded in the middle of it.

Automatic bursts continued to hit the ravine, and Tynda yelled at a heavyset soldier to respond with his own R.P.G. The soldier hoisted the weapon onto his shoulder and launched a grenade with a deafening blast, a few feet away from Artem.

"Too high," Tynda admonished. On a walkie-talkie, he told someone, "Use the machine gun."

As the fire from the Russians intensified, Tynda asked, "Who's on the R.P.G.?," but nobody answered. The heavyset soldier had gone to a different fighting position. With a huff of irritation, Tynda removed his jungle hat, set it on the sandbags, fetched the launcher, and shot it himself.

A few draftees were cowering at the barricade. Tynda ordered them to get to a trench on a nearby ridge. When the draftees started walking up an exposed path, he had to shout, "Not *that* way!"

He had a Kalashnikov that was augmented with another, smaller grenade launcher. Advancing as far as the barbed wire, he aimed the weapon at a high angle, and discharged a grenade. At this moment, a more subtle but no less alarming noise emerged through the bedlam: the faint whirr of a quadcopter drone hovering above us.

"Does it have a grenade?" a soldier asked.

"Who the fuck knows?"

Tynda fired into the air but missed the drone; as it shifted toward the ridge, he went to join the others in the trench. So did I, along with the photographer for this article, Maxim Dondyuk. Midway up the incline, a volley of zinging bullets forced us to crawl on our stomachs.

The trench was still a work in progress: you had to crouch and hunch to hide from snipers. When I'd stopped by a couple of hours earlier, the men there had been busy digging. Now they were shooting. More high-pitched rounds were crossing overhead. The heavyset soldier was squatting near a machine gunner who was staring over the sunflower stalks while resting the barrel of his weapon on a horizontal log.

"Do you see them?" the soldier asked.

"No," the machine gunner said. A voice came through his radio, announcing that a second drone had joined the first one.

"Copy."

Both were circling straight above us: two black silhouettes against the blue, like a pair of buzzards. The machine gunner swivelled his muzzle almost vertically and unleashed a salvo, but the weapon was too unwieldy. I was grateful for the narrowness of the trench, which had initially struck me as a design flaw: the passage was so tight that when you met someone going the other way you had to flatten yourself against a side, briefly exposing your head. This was intentional. The wider the trench, the more likely it was that projectiles or their fragments would find their way into it.

A grenade detached from one of the drones. A small geyser of earth erupted a few yards away from us. Between the snug walls, I hardly felt the explosion.

The contact ended as abruptly as it had begun. The drones, which have a battery life of only thirty minutes or so, returned to their pilots on the Russian side. The Ukrainians set down their weapons and picked up their shovels. In the excitement, I'd forgotten about Artem. He was still at the observation post, one eye to the periscope.

While Tynda and his team were fighting from the trench, long and powerful fusillades had issued from another Ukrainian position, on a hilltop behind them. I later went there with Tynda. In a blind overlooking the no man's land stood an improbably antique contraption on iron wheels: a Maxim gun, the first fully automatic weapon ever made. Although this particular model dated from 1945, it was virtually identical to the original version, which was invented in 1884: a knobbed crank handle, wooden grips, a lidded compartment for adding cold water or snow when the barrel overheated. The gun's operator, a rawboned soccer hooligan with brass knuckles tattooed on his hand, spoke of the Maxim like a car enthusiast lauding the performance of a vintage Mustang.

In the course of the past year, the U.S. has furnished Ukraine with more than thirty-five billion dollars in security assistance. Why, given the American largesse, had the 28th Brigade resorted to such a museum piece? A lot of equipment has been damaged or destroyed on the battlefield. At the same time, Ukraine appears to have forgone refitting debilitated units in order to stockpile for a large-scale offensive that is meant to take place later this spring. At least eight new brigades have been formed from scratch to spearhead the campaign. While these units have been receiving weapons, tanks, and training from the U.S. and Europe, veteran brigades like the 28th have had to hold the line with the dregs of a critically depleted arsenal. In December, while Pavlo's battalion was being decimated by the Wagner Group, General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the commander-in-chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, told *The Economist* that it was "more important to focus on the accumulation of resources" for future battles. "May the soldiers in the trenches forgive me," Zaluzhnyi said.

The most advanced and expensive U.S. contributions to the war have been longer-range howitzers and missile systems that operate from the rear. The infantry on the front relies on rudimentary muzzle-loaded mortars, for which there is currently a dire ammunition shortage. The major in charge of artillery for Pavlo's battalion told me that in Kherson his mortar teams had fired about three hundred shells a day; now they were rationed to five a day. The Russians averaged ten times that rate.

To help compensate for this defi-

ciency, the battalion used a Soviet antitank gun called an S.P.G.-9. The sergeant responsible for the weapon was code-named Kaban, or "Wild Boar." He was forty-two years old and had been fighting since 2015, shortly after Russia first encroached on the Donbas. His beard was turning gray, he was going bald, and he walked stiffly, having recently torn a meniscus in both his knees. Still, his call sign denoted a toughness and pugnacity that were as visible as ever.

When Kaban told me that he had an eighteen-year-old son, I assumed that both of them were in the Army. I'd met other fathers in the battalion whose adult sons were serving. But Kaban, despite his dedication to the military, had sent his son to Germany. "I told him, 'If you come back, I'll kill you myself,'" he explained. "We all understand we're going to die here."

Kaban said this in front of his subordinate, code-named Cadet, who had just turned nineteen. When I asked Kaban what it felt like to supervise someone his son's age, he answered, "Like fatherhood."

We were in a dugout where the pair lived along with a third man, a draftee in his thirties who sat mutely in the corner. The shelter was vastly more comfortable than the one where Syava, Odesa, and Bison slept, but it was claustrophobic nonetheless. The most important element of any dugout is the roof. Raw logs are brought on trucks as close to the front as possible, then carried by soldiers to the trenches. A proper roof consists of three layers of logs stacked crosswise under three feet of dirt—a thickness greater than the distance that most projectiles can penetrate during the millisecond between their impact and their detonation. Railroad ties serve as vertical posts. The dugout should be deep enough that the top barely crests the ground; from outside, all you see are steps descending to a subterranean door. Many of the dugouts that I visited had a cast-iron stove with a chimney pipe running to the surface. The interiors of more rearward shelters could be relatively plush: pallets laid down to make a floor, bunk beds with ladders, shelves and coat hooks mounted to walls that were lined with the lids of wooden ammunition boxes, like wainscoting. The major in charge of artillery had furnished his dugout with a folding garden chair and a glass hookah. Pavlo's command bunker was adorned with children's drawings, including one of a horizontal stick figure with a scribbled head wound, labelled "Putin."

Closer to the Zero Line, the dugouts were much smaller and cruder. Kaban's was dimly lit by a string of L.E.D. lights powered by a car battery. A trench led from the entrance to a log parapet, underneath which the S.P.G.-9 was concealed from Russian drones. There wasn't much to the weapon—a bazooka on a tripod—and it was in decrepit condition. The trigger mechanism was broken. To activate each warhead, Kaban had to pry open the rocket's gunpowder-filled cartridge with a pocketknife, twist together two wires at its base, connect those wires to a household electrical cable, then hook the cable onto a loop of bare copper that was attached to the gun with masking tape. He and Cadet would lug the S.P.G.-9 out into the open, where Cadet would take aim and fire. Then they would hurry back to the dugout before Russian drones or artillery could find them.

At around 7:30 P.M., the team was informed that the Russians might be preparing an assault. A mine-clearing vehicle had been spotted in the no man's land.

"Well, we have nothing to lose, right?" Cadet said.

Kaban replied, "I'd hoped that you would get married first, so I could fuck someone at your wedding."

The draftee nervously stoked the stove. Suddenly, I had a keen sense of how isolated and vulnerable the position was. Other dugouts at the front had Starlink satellites, which enabled direct communication with the battalion command. Kaban used only a portable Wi-Fi router that depended on a local SIM card with spotty service. Kaban's point of contact, a young officer, sent him short voice messages on Signal.

"I'm going on watch," Kaban said. "Don't panic."

If their position was overrun, Kaban



"I just think it's too easy to blame all your problems on a spell that turned you into a frog."

had told me, he would not allow himself to be taken captive. A few weeks earlier, a video had circulated on social media of Russian soldiers near Bakhmut gunning down a Ukrainian prisoner while telling him, “Die, bitch.” Another video, also from the Donbas, showed Russian soldiers castrating a Ukrainian prisoner with a box cutter. After I met Kaban, a video surfaced of a Russian soldier decapitating a Ukrainian prisoner as he screamed and writhed. “The best-case scenario is that they just execute us,” Kaban told me.

Before he left the dugout, his phone dinged with a new message from the officer. Kaban and Cadet were to shoot the S.P.G.-9 every hour until dawn. Kaban kept in his cargo pocket a digital tablet with several dozen targets flagged on a satellite map: Russian bunkers, trenches, and observation posts that had been identified by Ukrainian drones. “The key is regular strikes,” the officer said. “It’s crawling with infantry over there.”

Both Kaban and Cadet were now smiling.

“Here we go,” Kaban said.

Clouds covered the moon and the stars. The battalion had begun the war with about seventy-five American night-vision devices, but many had been lost as soldiers were killed or injured in firefights. Kaban and Cadet had to use red lights on their headlamps to navigate in the dark. An application on the tablet computed the coördinates of their weapon and the Russian target, factored in up-to-date meteorological data, and then advised Cadet how to adjust the gun’s angle and elevation.

When he pressed the trigger, a dull click signalled a misfire. Kaban clambered out of the trench and fiddled with the wires. On the next try, the gun produced a thunderous clap and a radiant gush of flame that lit up the sky. It was hard to say which felt worse: not being able to see, or being able to be seen.

As soon as we returned to the dugout—our ears ringing and pulses racing and nostrils filled with the metallic tang of the rocket’s propellant—Cadet lit a Marlboro menthol and began playing video games on his phone. This, I’d learn, was his routine. He had joined the Army the day after his eighteenth birthday, which had occurred four days after Russia invaded. He could not yet grow facial hair, his voice was still unsteady, and he retained the roundish, doughy features of an adolescent.

Cadet seemed to be so completely a child of the war that he’d never developed an instinct for self-preservation. He had grown up on a subsistence farm where his family raised pigs and chickens. In the Army, because of his age, he had first been assigned to a company of reserve soldiers who replaced casualties in other units; among the twenty-eight men in his platoon, he knew of only two who were still alive. He claimed to have fired the S.P.G.-9 more than a thousand times, and to have made “not one but many” confirmed kills with it. He smoked between two and three packs of cigarettes a day. Cadet did not use the trench to move between the dugout and the parapet; he scampered nimbly through the black woods, hopping over berms and foxholes, unencumbered by helmet or body armor. During one firing mission, a little after 2 A.M., he turned on a flashlight instead of his red headlamp. Back at the dugout, Kaban kicked him and demanded, “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“I forgot it,” Cadet muttered sullenly, like a grade-school student without his homework.

Although Kaban had characterized his relationship with Cadet as a paternal one, I wondered whether he admired

ON YOUR DEPARTURE TO CALIFORNIA

Prayer for you out west.
Where night falls only after mine.
The second curtain. That enigmatic dark,
and daylight so clarifying, it hurts.
Prayer for the headless deer in Saratoga
and the thirty lobster shells we buried
in a small Connecticut town.
For the elementary-school kids rushing headfirst
into the Brooklyn twilight. For the poets who came before
and saw the purple northeast, blizzard-full
but no quakes, and wanted for nothing else.
For the gold shops of Jackson Heights
and the dead soldiers in Mt. Auburn.
For the dead who just want to remain dead
and not dance into the speech of men.
For the tiny churches and their sullied bells.
For every gas station. For the tri-states.
Yes, even for Jersey’s ease. For Café Paulette,
our last meal, before the city fell.
Prayer for our Hart Crane. For our bridge.
The blue one. For your return to Prospect Park,
where I’ll be waiting, smug, dripping in city bees.
Prayer for you, queen of the wide air,
and your happy flights and scraped-up knees
and the young fields behind you.
Prayer for the sand-whipped Rockaway Beach,
where we spent a birthday and fought the wind.
You ran into the cold May ocean,
and I thought, *am I going to have to go in*
if she gets caught? just as you rose
from the water and waved.

—*Megan Fernandes*

or resented him for not being in Germany, like his real son. Later, Kaban entertained us with stories about his past romantic escapades, and Dondyuk, the photographer, asked him whether he'd imparted any lessons to Cadet.

"There's no point," Kaban said. "He'll be dead soon."

Cadet laughed, but Kaban didn't.

As it happened, Cadet's girlfriend was also a Ukrainian refugee in Germany. He'd found her on TikTok, and they chatted when the Wi-Fi in the dugout permitted. They'd never met in person. "We're hoping the war will be over this summer," Cadet said. "And then she'll come back, and we'll see." Kaban interrupted, sternly telling him to go dig in the trench. Like Syava, who'd joked about giving away his combat knife after the war, Cadet had made the mistake of envisaging a peaceful future.

Birds were chirping in the trees—the sun had risen. Possibly because of Kaban and Cadet's efforts, the Russian assault had not materialized. Kaban's tone softened. "I'll come with a shovel, too," he said.

On February 24, 2022, Volodymyr Zelensky, the President of Ukraine, declared a general mobilization for male citizens between the ages of eighteen and sixty. Civilians of all stripes flocked to military-registration offices, eager to fight. Some waited in line for days, only to be told that no more men were required. Today, popular support for resisting rather than negotiating with Russia remains high, but, as in every war, the burden of sacrifice has fallen increasingly on the underprivileged. Nearly every draftee I met in the trenches had been a manual laborer—farmer, carpenter, dockworker, plumber—and stories abounded of Ukrainians with means dodging conscription through graft or nepotism. "You could find people from the higher classes in the infantry at the beginning of the war," one veteran told me. "But, after a year, you don't see an end to this—your chances of dying are higher, you're fucking tired. Now most of the people are being drafted."

The preponderance of draftees—and the corresponding dearth of professional soldiers—has shifted more responsibility onto the officer corps, which has also been diminished. Lieutenants and captains whose duties were traditionally more administrative have become front-line fighters. The officer who had directed Kaban via Signal, code-named Volynyaka, was thirty years old and had the gung-ho physicality of a high-school quarterback. In addition to overseeing the S.P.G.-9 team, Volynyaka commanded one of the battalion's remaining combat vehicles. (Others had been wrecked by shelling.) The machine, a relic of the Soviet Union, was known as a B.R.M. It had tracks and a cannon but was too lightly armored to qualify as a tank, and its inability to withstand direct fire had earned it a grim epithet: the Iron Casket. When Volynyaka had put out a call for crew members, even Cadet had balked. "I'd seen how people burn alive inside," he told me. "One R.P.G. or mortar strike, and that's it."

Volynyaka, along with a driver and a gunner, had commandeered a vacated red brick house in Kostyantynivka, the town nearest to the Zero Line still inhabited by civilians. Twice a day, the three men brought the B.R.M. to a field behind the trenches, shot fifteen or twenty rockets, and returned to their base. (The vehicle was too conspicuous a target to park near the front.) The first time I accompanied them on this sortie, I rode behind the gunner, who was surprisingly



compact in stature and stood in an open hatch wearing a black sweatshirt, a black beanie, black cargo pants, black boots, black gloves, black sunglasses, and a black neck gaiter pulled over his face, printed with the white teeth and jaw of a skull. When we got back to Kostyantynivka, the gunner removed his gaiter. Code-named Darwin, he was a baby-faced youth about the same age as Cadet.

Darwin wore all black because uniforms turned that color anyway after two days in the B.R.M. "I feel less dirty like this," he explained. He was from Kherson, where he'd lived with his parents until two months into the Russian occupation. He had evacuated with another couple by pretending to be their underage son. After passing through nine Russian checkpoints, Darwin had gone to Odesa and joined the 28th Brigade.

His small size was an asset within the B.R.M.'s tight nest of hoses, pipes, levers, and gears. Volynyaka, by contrast, was too big-boned and brawny to squeeze through the hatches while wearing body armor. A rosary hung near the dials and switches of the control panel, and as we approached a white church outside Kostyantynivka I noticed Volynyaka crossing himself. In town, I asked him if the war had made him more religious. "No, the opposite," he said. "I've started to question the existence of God."

You didn't need to believe in God to solicit his protection, though. The randomness and unpredictability of Russian artillery had turned many of the soldiers superstitious. Talismans were ubiquitous. The B.R.M.'s twenty-three-year-old driver, code-named Criminal, had adopted a stuffed doll as a co-pilot. Pavlo, the battalion commander, carried an American silver dollar in his pocket. During seven years of war in the Donbas, he'd put no stock in lucky charms, but Kherson and Bakhmut had changed his perspective. "We need luck much more now," he told me.

The second time that I went out with the B.R.M., we passed an elderly woman walking down the road with a cane. When I looked back, she was blessing the crew. Such good-will gestures were the exception in Kostyantynivka. In other parts of Ukraine, people almost always waved or pumped their fists at any vehicles headed to the front. Here, most of the civilians averted their gazes. According to Volynyaka, "almost everyone" who had not already fled the town was pro-Russian. A clerk at the local grocery store had told him, "We don't want you here." I asked him if the hostility had eroded his motivation to keep fighting. He shook his head. "I know



The Ukrainians used a decades-old Soviet armored vehicle to deliver supplies. Its arrival triggered a frenzied rush to unload

it's my land—why should I care what they think?"

The soldiers of the 28th Brigade, many of whom came from rural areas, shared a concept of Ukrainian land that was strikingly literal. In the trenches, several infantrymen had nodded at the dark-brown walls surrounding us, which were marbled with pale, healthy roots, and asked me if the soil in the United States was as rich and arable as theirs. The fact that this same soil now shielded them against injury and death had only deepened their attachment to it. They had become a species that burrowed to elude predation. On the Zero Line, there was only enough water for drinking, not for washing, and the men's cracked fingernails and thickly calloused palms were so encrusted with dirt that it seemed to have become part of them.

At sunset, at the red brick house, a soldier was in the yard, making troughs with a shovel and sowing them with pea seeds. "This is what we're fighting for," he said, his sleeves pushed to his elbows. "This land is dear to us." He was a forty-seven-year-old construction worker whose job was to extend the range of the B.R.M.'s rockets by disassembling them with a monkey wrench and removing a component that caused them to detonate after a certain distance. In his spare time, he tended the vegetable patch, which he hoped would be sprouting when the homeowners returned.

Darwin, manning the turret of the B.R.M. while it charged over an open field, had pulled back the string on an imaginary bow and released an imaginary arrow toward the Russian line. He later told me that his preferred avatar in his favorite video game, Skyrim, was an archer. "GROVE ST 4 LIFE," a reference to Grand Theft Auto, was tattooed on his forearm. When he found enough bandwidth, he planned to download a game called World of Tanks onto his phone.



ammunition, razor wire, and energy drinks.

Neither Darwin, Volynyaka, nor Criminal had been trained on the B.R.M.; they'd figured out how to operate it the same way that Kaban and Cadet had learned to hot-wire the S.P.G.-9—by consulting the Internet. Such digital literacy had its perils, though. Two days after I met the B.R.M. crew, the 28th Brigade was poised to attempt its own advance across the no man's land. Then, on the eve of the offensive, a young member of the brigade posted a video of himself and his comrades in which he announced where "we will be attacking." By the time the video was deleted, it had been viewed more than eleven thousand times.

Early the next morning, Dondyuk and I went to a deserted village where one of the brigade's medical platoons was based. The medics had stayed up all night preparing for the operation, which now appeared to have been cancelled. Nonetheless, an unusual number of Ukrainian tanks and Humvees were passing through the village. The activity prompted speculation that the video might have been a Ukrainian feint designed to divert Russian attention from elsewhere in the vicinity of Bakhmut. With both sides so adept at manipulating information, you never knew what was real and what was a stratagem. "It's better not to think about it," a medic advised.

Five medevac teams worked in shifts around the clock. The team on duty was stationed in a sod-roofed root cellar on an abandoned wheat farm. The property owner had spray-painted the double doors of his barn with the words "DO NOT BREAK LOCKS." The locks had been broken. Inside was an M-113, an American personnel carrier from the Vietnam War. It looked like a green metal box on tracks: there was no turret or gun, and its aluminum hull could deflect bullets but little else. The driver, Kyrylo, was a middle-aged man with a stutter who'd grown up working with his father on tractors and combines. He'd never even seen a manual for the M-113. "I can drive anything with an engine," he said. "A vehicle is a vehicle—you don't have to be a genius."

A medic and a dispatcher made up the rest of the team. The medic, a forty-seven-year-old grandmother named Leonora, was the only woman I encountered in the 28th Brigade. She'd worked as a trauma nurse for more than a decade before joining the Army, in 2019, after her husband moved to France without her, and now she was a sergeant. She had silver hair and narrow eyes that almost vanished when she smiled, which she did when I asked her how it felt to be surrounded all the time by men, and infantrymen at that.

"I'm used to it," Leonora said. "I don't notice."

We were eating a breakfast of bread and Nutella when a request came over the radio for a medevac at the Lower Harbor—code for a specific trench position.

"Fuck," the dispatcher said. "It's dangerous there."

Kyrylo was already running to the M-113. There was about an inch of clearance on either side as he pulled out of the barn. A ramp folded down, and Leonora, Dondyuk, and I climbed in. Two bloodstained canvas stretchers were propped on wooden ammunition boxes. Leonora grabbed a ceiling strap with each hand as Kyrylo accelerated toward the front. During evacuations, he drove at full speed. The maxed-out machine sounded like a blender full of silverware.

Leonora seemed to be in a meditative trance, numb to the cacophony, breathing deeply and slowly through her nose. After five minutes or so, Kyrylo stopped. Leonora stood up and stuck her head through a hatch in the roof, announcing into her radio, "We have arrived at the Lower Harbor. We are waiting."

A burst of bullets whizzed by. "Shit, motherfucker," Leonora said, sitting back down. Kyrylo moved the M-113 a few yards; from inside, we couldn't see where we were or what was happening. Leonora tried again to hail someone. "Silence," she reported.

"Where are we supposed to go?" Kyrylo asked.

There was more small-arms shooting—and then what sounded like an R.P.G. Gazing up through his own hatch, Kyrylo either heard or saw a drone: "Fuck, there's a bird above us."

Leonora repeated into the radio, "We are waiting at the Lower Harbor." After a second R.P.G. blast, she told Kyrylo, "I can't reach anyone."

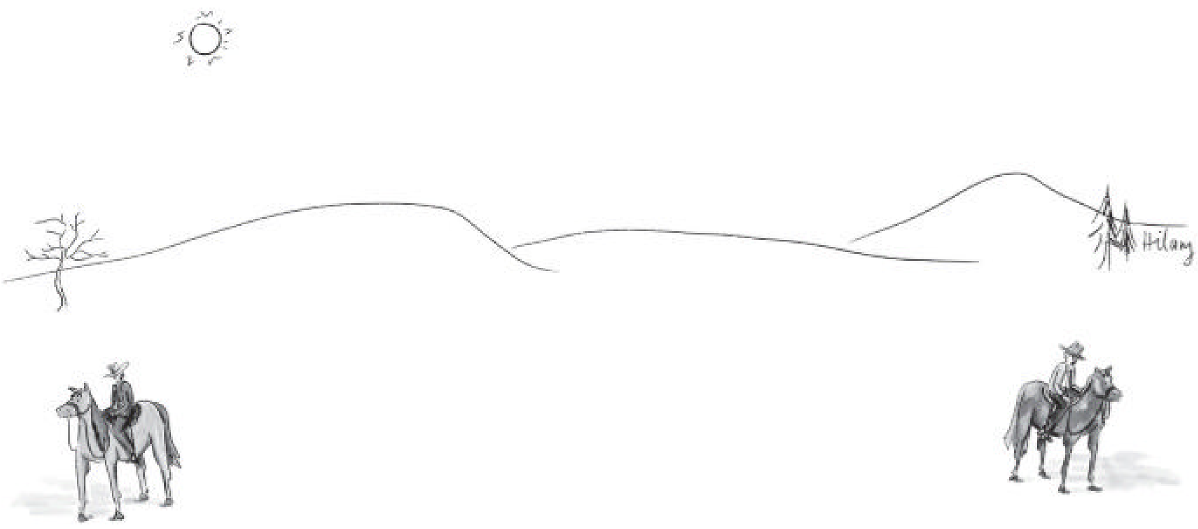
Amid extended exchanges of machine-gun fire, eight loud explosions reverberated outside. Kyrylo, concerned about the risk of fire if we were hit by artillery, said, "Maybe we should open the door."

"Not yet," Leonora said. "Bullets might ricochet in."

"They won't."

Dondyuk asked Kyrylo if he was worried that we might be trapped inside. "Yes," Kyrylo said, his stutter almost preventing him from getting the word out. "It's happened before."

Some minutes later, Leonora ascertained that the man needing evacuation was not at the Lower Harbor but



"Let's be close enough to chat but far enough to be cowboys."

• •

at another position a short drive away. When we arrived there, Kyrylo lowered the ramp. We were in a muddy field. A soldier, whose face was covered with dirt, emerged from some trees, supporting a limping man with a wounded chest.

"Let's go!" the soldier yelled. "Quickly!"

The man belonged to an assault unit that had just captured a Russian trench. He had been injured by shrapnel. Blood was smeared across his brow, but his comrades had already bandaged his chest, and there was little for Leonora to do. The man winced in pain and clung to the other soldier, who hugged him close as Kyrylo sped off, dust and debris scudding into the compartment through the open hatches.

About a mile and a half from the trenches, we arrived at a casualty-collection point—a dusty intersection filled with armored vehicles, including one with a metal chair mounted on its roof behind a twin-barrelled anti-aircraft gun. From the cramped hull, medics were extracting a man who couldn't walk. Leonora handed over the wounded soldier, and Kyrylo proceeded to the farm. I never found out whether the assault unit's attack was a downsized alternative to the offensive leaked in the Ukrainian soldier's video, or whether the video was a deliberate diversion from the attack.

Back at the root cellar, half-eaten bread slices were lying where we'd left them. I asked Leonora if, on our way to the Lower Harbor, she'd been praying. Not exactly, she said. She had been practicing visualization: marshalling positive mental energy to bring about a desired outcome. "I think about the soldier, to protect him until I arrive," she said. Then she went outside to smoke a cigarette and wait for the next call.

The following afternoon, I got a text from Odesa, the soldier who'd once gone AWOL. He was now in Kostyantynivka. Every week or so, the men in the trenches went to town to do laundry, bathe, eat a hot meal, and pick up mail. We met in the parking lot of a post office, where a line of soldiers snaked out the door. (Care packages often contained treats from home. While I was with the 28th Brigade, one infantryman received a Napoleon cake made by his mother; another, two plastic bottles of moonshine from his uncle.) When I told Odesa about the wounded soldier, he said he'd heard that the assault unit had killed several Russian soldiers. I asked how things were at his position. "The usual," he said.

Freshly showered and shaved, Odesa looked like a different person. But the trips to Kostyantynivka usually lasted only several hours. Most of the veterans had been granted extended leave just once during the past year—typically for a week and a half. Volynyaka had taken advantage of his break to marry his girlfriend. Odesa told me that the next time he went home he planned to do the same with a woman he'd got pregnant while he was AWOL. "It gives me motivation to stay alive," he said.

Unlike U.S. soldiers in every American conflict since the Second World War, Ukrainian draftees are generally not being contracted for fixed periods of service or deployed on tours with defined limits. They are being indentured for as long as they are needed. One officer told me, "You come home with victory, without a limb, or dead." A fourth option was desertion. "Sometimes they return, sometimes they don't," the officer said.

In January, Zelensky signed legislation that raised the maximum punishment for desertion to twelve years in prison. It is unknown how many Ukrainians have been sentenced to date, but one factor potentially obstructing enforcement of the law is the reluctance of superior officers to denounce offenders. Odesa's platoon leader, a senior lieutenant named Ivan, told me that he pitied the draftees in his platoon; like Pavlo, he placed the blame for their shortcomings on inadequate training. One of his soldiers, he said, "was just walking down the street when guys approached him and physically took him to the draft center—in less than two days, he was with the brigade."

Ivan did not begrudge Odesa the two months he had gone AWOL. All the old hands were burned out, the lieutenant explained, himself included. "I'm tired," he said. "I want to go home. I just want three months of rest. After that, I'll happily continue to fight."

Dondyuk and I were at Odesa's position a few days after I'd seen him at the post office. Shelling had further razed the area; more trees had been knocked down, and those which stood were mangled and lacerated. The men were still rebuilding the machine-gun nest where their comrade had been killed. One of the medics I'd met had responded to the strike; it had been the first time, he said, that he'd seen shrapnel decapitate somebody.

Ivan wanted the soldiers to dig more and better trenches. "The chances of dying when you're not in a trench are much higher," he scolded. "I'm not going to yell at you—I'm just explaining."

In contrast to the draftees, the lieutenant was elaborately outfitted, with high-quality body armor, noise-cancelling earphones, a lightweight ballistic helmet, and a new assault rifle decorated with a Unicorn Princess sticker

from his daughter. He'd bought most of the gear with his own money. Ivan had attended a reserve-officer-training program while in law school, spoke fluent English, and wore a Star of David patch given to him by a friend from Israel. When I asked him if he felt out of place in the infantry, he said that everyone did: "It doesn't matter if you're a soldier, a sergeant, a commander—you want to transfer from the infantry." After I left Ukraine, Ivan joined a drone-reconnaissance team, and texted me that he was now a "happy bastard."

At the machine-gun nest, Ivan's men wearily accepted his chiding. "It's fine," Syava assured him. "We're going to dig." He'd been up since 2 A.M., when an air strike had woken him. Everybody looked haggard and sleep-deprived. Exhaustion bred complacency, but so did habituation. When incoming artillery drove us into the dugout, I recognized a forty-three-year-old carpenter whom I'd met ten days earlier. At the time, he had just arrived and was clearly unnerved and disoriented. Now he seemed as unimpressed as Syava by the booming ordnance. When I remarked on the difference in him, he said, "I was a civilian," as if he were describing some distant chapter of his life that was no longer germane.

Despite the apathy and the lassitude, there was an animal alertness in the air. Nobody strayed more than a few steps from the dugout, and the taut communal anticipation of the next Russian strike recalled a row of sprinters in the blocks listening for the starting pistol.

At lunchtime, some of the men forked cold meat out of cans while others opened up packages of stale jelly-filled rolls. The carpenter had recently made his first trip to Kostyantynivka, and had brought back a box of chocolate pastries to celebrate his son's thirteenth birthday. The dugout was so tiny that the soldiers had to lie shoulder to shoulder—their clothes were kept outside. An explosion had incinerated Syava's winter coat. Food and trash were strewn everywhere. The mess had attracted mice. Adding to the unsanitary conditions, feces and soiled toilet paper littered the periphery of the position. Nobody wanted to die while burying his shit.

After machine-gun bullets buzzed the trees and we again crammed into the dugout, Syava complained, "It smells like dirty socks in here."

"Whose socks are those?" another soldier demanded.

"It must be Lyova," Syava said.

"What's wrong with him?"

"He has smelly feet."

Not long after, Lyova was hospitalized with tuberculosis. It is unclear when and where he first fell ill, but in such unhygienic quarters, viruses were rampant. When a sergeant overheard a draftee telling me that he was sick, the sergeant interjected, "*Everybody* is sick."

A long path leading from Syava's dugout to Ivan's snaked around craters cordoned off with deadwood, so that soldiers wouldn't fall into them at night. The battalion had retreated from the Wagner-held village when the ground was still frozen, and this had complicated their digging. Ivan's shelter had been made by blowing up hundreds of pounds of antitank mines, then squaring off the gaping hole with shovels. Now several infantrymen were working on a system of narrow channels that branched out from the bunker, which would prevent it from flooding when it rained.

Ivan shared the dugout with his superior, the company commander, who was called Oper. A forty-year-



old former police detective, Oper had reason to be preoccupied with staying dry. In Kherson, the relentless Russian shelling had precluded his men from building adequate shelters, obliging them to sleep on the ground. Oper had contracted a bacterial infection, which spread over his skin and was aggravated by ravenous fleas. For months, he was plagued by open sores that he could not stop scratching. "I almost rotted alive," he said, taking out his phone to show me photographs of his torso mottled with pustules. Now he was perennially bundled in a down hoodie, a British Army coat, a German Army poncho, and a balaclava. His scraggly beard and eyebrows complemented the cold-weather apparel, giving him the look of an Arctic explorer.

While we were sitting in the dugout, Pavlo, the battalion commander, informed Oper, via Signal, that the Russians were preparing a "feast," or a heavy bombardment—perhaps in retaliation for the assault unit's attack on their trench, or perhaps as a probing tactic ahead of their own offensive. "Be ready," Pavlo said.

The feast began soon afterward. Close impacts caused the dugout's log roof to flex. A mortar blew open the door with a bright flash. The precise, repeated strikes made Oper and Ivan suspect that the Russians had realized the position was a command post.

"Maybe the drone saw the Starlink satellite," Ivan said. "Or they saw our toilet. It's obviously for officers." (The toilet was just a pit that had been dug deeply enough to afford its occupant protection while squatting.)

"They might have seen people getting dropped off here," Oper said. "They're not stupid."

Ivan grabbed a pastry from the food rations. "I want to eat some cake before I die."

"If you want to die, get the fuck out of here," Oper said.

All the infantrymen told jokes to relieve the singular feeling of helplessness induced by artillery, but Oper's sense of humor was unrivalled. As the feast went on, he recounted one bawdy anecdote after another, patiently delaying their punch lines while combing his fingers through his beard.

Morale was as crucial an asset as any in the infantry. One day, while I was on the Zero Line, an "Army psychologist" had visited. He did not have a degree in psychology, and his role was limited to identifying soldiers who were incapacitated by fear and could not "overcome their paralysis." He explained, "I try to convey to them why they must follow their orders. If that doesn't work, then we send them to a real psychologist."

The Ukrainian military code for a

wounded soldier is Three Hundred. For a dead soldier, it's Two Hundred. Soldiers who refuse to follow orders are sometimes facetiously labelled Five Hundreds. Ivan claimed that men often faked injuries in a bid to escape the trenches. "It happens all the fucking time," he said. But, he allowed, such desperation could arise from genuine psychological damage. The process for determining which Five Hundreds were malingering and which were what the Army psychologist called "mentally ill" was ambiguous. Few men seemed to satisfy whatever the criteria were for receiving medical leave. Almost all the veterans had suffered multiple concussions, but, as Kaban had told me, "If we get sent for treatment, who will stay in the trenches?"

Post-traumatic stress disorder did not seem to be an apposite diagnosis for anyone on the front, because the traumatic event was still happening. Taking leave, however, could trigger episodes of P.T.S.D. Oper, who had last returned home for his daughter's baptism, told me, "It's easier psychologically to stay here. It's hard to come back after visiting civilization." During the night that I spent with the S.P.G.-9 team, Kaban had recalled going to Odesa a few months earlier and experiencing a panic attack as soon as he exited the train station. The overwhelming stimuli—bustling crowds, speeding cars, jarring city noises—felt like an onslaught of potential threats. Strangers were rifling through their bags, making phone calls; Kaban instinctively reached for his Kalashnikov, only to realize that he was unarmed. When he spotted a group of soldiers patrolling the station, he ran to them, pale and shaking. "Don't worry," a soldier assured him. "You're not the first. This happens a lot."

At least once a day, another Soviet armored vehicle, this one called a B.M.P., resupplied Ivan and Oper's dugout. Its arrival triggered a frenzied rush to unload boxes of ammunition, bales of razor wire, cases of energy drinks, and other provisions. Soldiers who had been given permission to leave the front would scramble onto the roof, hugging the cannon or clinging to whatever they could as the vehicle roared off.

The first time that Dondyuk and I hitched a ride on the B.M.P., it showed up at dusk, while we were being shelled. "That's it, let's go!," Oper, who was also heading to Kostyantynivka, shouted. Rounds were slamming into the field as we sprinted from the dugout. "Faster, faster! Son of a bitch!," Oper yelled at half a dozen soldiers crowding onto the B.M.P. In the air, rocket-propelled grenades exploded just shy of us. "*Faster!*," he bellowed. "What the fuck are you waiting for?" Once we were out of range of the R.P.G.s, which left black clouds of smoke hanging in the twilight, a cigarette was passed around.

The evening after the feast, Dondyuk and I decided that it was time to leave the unit. We joined the men who were trickling into Oper's dugout to await the B.M.P. Syava was there, using the Starlink connection to video-chat with his wife. They both laughed at his unkempt beard and hair, and Syava promised to "shave properly" when they were reunited. This time, perhaps in deference to Syava's wife, no one chastised him for having reveries about returning home.

At some point, Odesa showed up: he had reluctantly agreed to get fitted for a helmet. "It's going to look like a yarmulke," Oper said, teasing him about the size of his head. When I asked Oper if he'd always been a comedian, he an-



swered with another quip: "War makes you funny, doesn't it?" For Oper, at least, levity seemed to provide a necessary insulation from the ordeal of combat. At the start—when there were no Five Hundreds or fainthearted draftees, and everyone was still a volunteer, galvanized by a profound sense of patriotic duty—Oper had commanded twelve extraordinarily courageous men. He had loved them all, and all of them had died. The losses had broken something in him, and he no longer permitted himself to form comparable attachments to his subordinates.

Yet the emotional distance that Oper placed between himself and his men—or that Kaban imposed between himself and Cadet—was nothing compared with the disconnect between the front and the rest of Ukraine. The whole country has been affected by the war, but nobody has absorbed its misery and horror the way infantrymen have. Meanwhile, the scope of the conflict has shrunk even as its brutality has escalated, meaning that a smaller segment of the citizenry has been asked to suffer more for objectives that are increasingly less self-evident. This divide has fostered animosity. Oper believed that draft dodgers should lose their citizenship, and he did not think that having three children should exclude a man from serving. "It should be the other way around," he said. "They have *more* to fight for."

At the 28th Brigade's trenches south of Bakhmut, we could often hear the fighting in the city, and one of Pavlo's three companies had been dispatched to join the urban combat. Thousands of Ukrainians are thought to have died in Bakhmut, and the city has become an uninhabitable wasteland, leading some to question whether the battle has been worth its cost in lives. Various strategic rationales have been offered: more Russian soldiers are dying than Ukrainian soldiers are; a withdrawal would merely shift the carnage to another town; it is advantageous to tie up Russian forces until the new Ukrainian brigades can launch their spring offensive. But Zelensky has also imbued Bakhmut with symbolic significance. While addressing the U.S. Congress, in December, he claimed, "Just like the Battle of Saratoga, the fight for Bakhmut will change the trajectory of our war for independence and for freedom." This March, Zelensky told the Associated Press that if Ukraine lost the city Putin would "smell that we are weak" and "sell this victory to the West, to his society, to China, to Iran."

Such considerations may be justified, but they have an abstract quality that is far removed from the mud and blood of the front. "The infantry hasn't changed since the First World War,"

Oper said. "Weapons, communications, and logistics have changed, but our job is the same." Another thing that hasn't changed is the expectation that infantrymen will do their job without necessarily understanding why. When it's unclear how they figure into the broader strategic calculus—and whether they are being sacrificed carelessly, as Odesa had come to feel about his friends in Kherson—infantrymen fight to save one another. The campaign to win a war can then resemble a struggle to survive it.

When the B.M.P. pulled up to Oper's dugout, I climbed onto the turret and sat beside a twenty-two-year-old sniper whose call sign was Student. I'd met him on the Zero Line, where he'd stuffed two candy wrappers into his ears before firing a four-foot-long American rifle across the no man's land. He'd been discharged from the hospital two weeks earlier, after being shot in the thigh. He was visiting Kostyantynivka because he had the flu.

Student and I each hooked an arm around the cannon between us, and the B.M.P. sped across the fields, spitting red sparks and black exhaust, rising and dipping over the muddy craters and fallow rows like a ship plowing through choppy seas. In the distance, a bright incendiary munition was drifting slowly down; flames were dancing on a nearby ridge. I'd hoped to see Pavlo a final time, but the battalion command center had been hit earlier that day, and the soldiers were digging a replacement. As the B.M.P. passed Pavlo's old position, I saw that the farmhouse had been flattened. The hand-painted sign—"TO MOSCOW"—still hung on the tree.



"Goodbye, sweetheart. No matter where you go in this life, or what you do, always remember that you signed an N.D.A. with us."

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Spring had arrived practically overnight a few days before I left the front: bluebells and other wildflowers bloomed on the trench walls, and green shrubbery carpeted the ravine leading to the Zero Line. Since then, the mud throughout the Donbas had dried out, making fields and roads more traversable and setting the stage for Ukraine's much anticipated offensive. On May 11th, the chief of the Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, stated on social media that Ukrainian forces around Bakhmut had begun "hitting our flanks—and unfortunately, in some places, they are having success." One of those places is in the south of the city, not far from the 28th Brigade. At least for now, though, the same few hundred yards of dead sunflowers separate the Russian forces from Pavlo's battalion.

When Dondyuk and I departed the front and drove northwest, toward Kyiv, we passed through cities and villages that the last major Ukrainian offensive, in the fall, had liberated. Many of them lay in ruins. In Izyum, Russian forces had left behind a mass burial site containing hundreds of civilians; some showed signs of torture. A paved highway connected Izyum to Kharkiv, the second-biggest city in Ukraine and the focus of indiscriminate Russian shelling during the first months of the war. On the southern outskirts of Kharkiv, we stopped at a sprawling cemetery.

Years ago, an "Alley of Heroes" had been reserved on one end of the grounds for residents who had been killed in the Donbas. By the time Russia expanded its invasion, the section contained dozens of granite headstones; since then, the toll had risen too steeply to keep up with, and new graves were little more than low mounds of dirt.

A breeze was sweeping through hundreds of Ukrainian flags marking the mounds. Bouquets covered some of the plots; others had been planted with flowers. The soil was less dark than in the Donbas, but was just as soft and fertile.

Beyond the rustle of the flags, I heard a familiar sound: on the edge of the cemetery, four soldiers were shovelling earth into a fresh grave. A group of mourners silently watched them. A few feet away, a second funeral was taking place. That casket was still open, displaying a middle-aged man in uniform under a silk sheet. Perhaps because the four soldiers were going to bury this man, too, they worked with a discordant urgency, stabbing the excavated dirt with their spades and flinging it back into the hole, sweaty and out of breath. They weren't making a trench; they were unmaking one. But they dug as if their lives depended on it. ♦

PROFILES

WORDS FAIL

The tortured bond of Alice Sebold and Anthony Broadwater, the man wrongfully convicted of her rape.

BY RACHEL AVIV

A few months ago, the writer Alice Sebold began to experience a kind of vertigo. She looked at a cup on the table, and it no longer appeared solid. Her vision fractured. Objects multiplied. Her awareness of depth shifted suddenly. Sometimes she glanced down and for a split second felt that there was no floor.

Sebold and I had recently begun corresponding, a little more than a year after she learned that the wrong man had been sent to prison, in 1982, for raping her. In 1999, she had published "Lucky," a best-selling memoir about the rape and the subsequent conviction of a young Black man named Anthony Broadwater. Then she wrote "The Lovely Bones," a novel about a girl who is raped and murdered, which has been described as the most commercially successful début novel since "Gone with the Wind." But now Sebold had lost trust in language. She stopped writing and reading. Even stringing together sentences in an e-mail felt like adopting "a sense of authority that I don't have," she said.

Sebold, who is sixty, recognized that her case had taken a deeply American shape: a young white woman accuses an innocent Black man of rape. "I still don't know where to go with this but to grief and to silence and to shame," she wrote to me.

In February, I met Sebold in San Francisco for the first time. She lives alone with her dog. She wore fingerless woollen gloves and kept the lights off; her living room was lit by a window. Several times she started explaining something she'd once thought, and then stopped, midsentence. Although she'd quickly accepted the news that Broadwater was innocent, she felt as if she had "strapped on the new reality" and was still in the process of inhabiting it. She allowed that her experience with vertigo represented a kind of psychological progress: she was absorbing the fact that "there was no ground when I thought there was ground," she said. "There's that sense of standing up and immediately needing to sit down because you're going to fall over."

She was fearful of taking in new details too quickly. "It's not just that the past collapses," she said. "The present collapses, and any sense of good I ever did collapses. It feels like it's a whole spinning universe that has its own velocity and, if I just stick my finger in it, it will take me—and I don't know where I'll end up."

She was struggling to figure out what to call Broadwater. She had avoided his name for forty years. "Broadwater" felt too cold. "Anthony" felt like a level of closeness she didn't deserve. And yet their lives were intertwined. "The rapist came out of nowhere and shaped my entire life," she said. "My rape came out of nowhere and shaped his entire life."

Sebold and Broadwater had defined themselves through stories that were in conflict. But Broadwater, too, felt that they were bound together, the same moments creating the upheaval in their lives. "We both went through the fire," he said. "You see movies about rape and the young lady is scrubbing herself in the shower, over and over. And I'm saying to myself, 'Damn, I feel the same way.' Will it ever be gone from my memory, my mind, my thoughts? No. And it's not going to be gone for her, either."

Sebold was raped in a pedestrian tunnel in a park around midnight on May 8, 1981, the last day of her freshman year at Syracuse University. "I heard someone walking behind me," she wrote in an affidavit. "I started to walk faster and was suddenly overtaken from behind and grabbed around the mouth." When she tried to run away, the man yanked her by the hair, dragged her along a brick path, pounded her skull into the ground, and said he'd kill her if she screamed. Eventually, she stopped resisting and tried to intuit what he wanted. "He worked away on me," she wrote in "Lucky." "I became one with this man."

She walked back to her dorm, bleeding, and a student called an ambulance. According to a medical exam, her nose was lacerated, her urine was bloody, and her clothes and hair were matted with dirt and leaves. When she was interviewed by the police that morning, she said that her rapist was a Black man, "16-18 yrs. of age, small and muscular build." In the affidavit, she wrote, "I desire prosecution in the event this individual is caught." But the detective on her case seemed skeptical of her account—he wrote, without explanation, that it did not seem "completely factual"—and recommended that "this case be referred to the inactive file."

Sebold went home for the summer to a suburb of Philadelphia, where she rarely changed out of her nightgown. Friends from her parents' church, where her mother was a warden, were told of the rape and treated her as if she had contracted a spiritual disease. Sebold saw herself as a misfit, an "earthy loose cannon," she said, and felt that being raped confirmed her separateness. She sensed that her father believed she was at fault somehow, for walking through a park at night alone. Her parents wanted her to drop out of Syracuse and spend her sophomore year at a small Catholic college near home, but she had been accepted into classes that fall with the writers Tess Gallagher and Tobias Wolff, and she didn't want to lose the chance to study with them. Even during the rape, she was aware that she would eventually write about it. "It was one of the ways that I stayed with myself," she told me. "There's that thing where you shut down, but you don't want to disappear, so you reach out for the thing that connects you to life, and



"I still don't know where to go with this but to grief and to silence and to shame," Sebold wrote, after the exoneration.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELINOR CARUCCI

for me it was words, language, writing."

In the fall, Gallagher, a poet, introduced herself to Sebold's class by singing a ballad. She instructed her students to write "poems that mean," a phrase that Sebold jotted down in her notebook. She felt that Gallagher, the partner of Raymond Carver, who also taught at the university, embodied the transcendence of a life devoted to writing. Carver was such a celebrity on campus that, to discourage students from stopping by their home at all hours, he and Gallagher hung a cardboard sign from their door that read "No visitors please," with a picture of eyes squinting in concentration.

For her first assignment, Sebold turned in an opaque five-page poem that alluded to the rape. The other students didn't pick up on the metaphor, and at office hours Gallagher proposed that Sebold write a poem with a more straightforward conceit: it should begin with the line "If they caught you." Gallagher told me, "I realize now that that was rather dangerous, because I'm not a psychiatrist, but writing comes out of a being, and you must minister to the being. I saw her anger and lostness, and I had to make a way for the condition—that essential condition of having been violated—to find speech."

In the class the following week, Sebold read aloud a poem, heavily influenced by Sylvia Plath, called "Conviction," which was addressed to her rapist. "If they caught you," she wrote. "Long enough for me / to see that face again, / maybe I would know / your name." She went on, "Come to me, Come to me, / Come die and lie, beside me."

The next week, before her workshop with Tobias Wolff, Sebold was picking up a snack on the main street near campus when she saw a man who looked like her rapist. "I was hyperaware," she wrote in "Lucky." "I went through my checklist: right height, right build, something in his posture." A few minutes later, she saw the man crossing the street toward her. "Hey," the man said. "Don't I know you?" He was actually talking to a police officer named Paul Clapper, who was behind Sebold, but she thought he was addressing her, and she suddenly felt certain that he had been on top of her in the tunnel, and that he was mocking her, because he'd got away. She couldn't speak. "I needed all my energy to focus on believing I was not under his control again," she wrote. She walked away quickly and heard him laughing.

She hurried to class and told Wolff that she had to miss the workshop. "She was utterly distraught," Wolff said, "and she told me that she had been raped and that she had just seen her rapist down on Marshall Street and that he had spoken to her." Wolff told her, "You've got to call the police right now." The author of memoirs about the Vietnam War and a tumultuous childhood, he had a kind of mantra: "Hold on to the memories, keep everything straight." He shared that advice with Sebold.

She rushed back to her dorm room, "every nerve ending pushing out against the edges of my skin," to call the police. As she walked, "I became a machine," she wrote. "I think it must be the way men patrol during wartime, completely attuned to movement or threat. The quad is not the quad but a battlefield where the enemy is alive and hiding. He waits to attack the moment you let your guard down. The answer—never let it down, not even for a second."

The scene is a devastating portrait of the nightmare-like state that post-traumatic stress disorder can induce. Previously, when Sebold had seen men who even vaguely resembled her rapist, she had felt sick. On some level, she wrote, she knew that these people hadn't raped her, but described how eerie it was that "I feel like I've lain underneath all these men." This time, her terror solidified into a firm belief.

The moment of recognition was perhaps amplified by the wild, magical hopes that can accompany the act of writing. Sebold had looked to Gallagher as a kind of good witch of art, the sort of writer and woman she wished to be. Now Sebold had made literal Gallagher's instruction to write "poems that mean." She had summoned her rapist.

Sebold sketched the man's face, and the Syracuse Police Department issued an alert to its officers. Clapper, the cop who had been chatting with him, recognized the description. Nine days later, Anthony Broadwater, who was twenty years old, was arrested. One of six brothers, Broadwater had left the Marine Corps to take care of his father, a former janitor at Syracuse, who was dying of cancer. His mother had died of pneumonia when he was five, and he and his brothers had been dispersed among various relatives. Broadwater was working as a telephone installer. He couldn't remember what he'd been doing when Sebold was raped, nearly five months earlier, but, he told the police, "I know I wasn't doing *that*." He had



"O.K., I have the e-mail open, but I don't see an attachment. I would ask your brother for help, but he's so busy with work and the baby, I don't know how he does it. Wait, I see it now—do I just click on it? I clicked on it and nothing happened. I'm telling you I'm clicking on it right now."

greeted Clapper because he remembered him as a rookie cop who used to patrol his neighborhood.

Five days after the arrest, Gallagher went to the courthouse with Sebold for a hearing. After Sebold testified, a memo from the district attorney's office reported, "She makes a very good appearance, handled herself very well on cross-examination, and was very cool and collected." A judge ruled that the prosecution could move forward. Sebold called her parents to tell them the news. "I could see her trying to talk with them, and it was very awkward," Gallagher told me. "I just felt they weren't responsive in some way. They could not connect with what was happening to her. I could feel that she was unprotected."

Two weeks later, Sebold was asked to identify Broadwater in a lineup. He was the fourth in a line of five Black men wearing jail uniforms. Sebold identified the fifth man. After signing a form that confirmed her decision, she felt a wave of nausea. She sensed that she'd made the wrong choice. The detective on her case looked downcast and told her, "You were in a hurry to get out of there," according to her account in "Lucky."

The assistant district attorney, Gail Uebelhoer, was a thirty-one-year-old pregnant woman whom Sebold saw as another role model, her guide through a court system dominated by men. Sebold felt that she had failed Uebelhoer. But, Sebold writes in "Lucky," Uebelhoer reassured her that her mistake was understandable. "Of course you chose the wrong one," Uebelhoer said. "He and his attorney worked to make sure you'd never have a chance." She said that Broadwater had intentionally duped her by asking an almost identical-looking friend from jail to stand in the No. 5 spot and stare at her, to scare and fluster her. (In fact, Broadwater was not friends with the man in the No. 5 spot, and they did not look the same.) In a memo, Uebelhoer wrote that Sebold had chosen the wrong man because he was "a dead ringer for defendant."

Broadwater's attorney, Steven Paquette, assumed that the case would be dismissed. He was shocked when Uebelhoer presented it to a grand jury that day. He wondered if she was trying to compensate for the indifference with which the police had originally met Sebold's account of her rape. "I think she may have been driven by a feeling of 'Darn it, this isn't going to happen to this young lady again,'" Paquette said. (Uebelhoer didn't respond to requests for an interview.)

On the witness stand, Sebold tried to explain her error. "Five did look at me almost in a way as if he knew me even though I realized you really can't see through the mirror," she said. "I don't know, I was very scared, but I picked five basically because he was looking at me and his features are very much like No. 4."

"You picked him out of the lineup," a juror said to her. "Are you absolutely sure that this is the one?"

"No, five I am not absolutely sure," she said. "It was between four and five, but I picked five because he was looking at me."

"So then, what you are saying, you are not absolutely sure that he was the one?" the juror asked.

"Right."

When Clapper testified, a juror asked him, "When someone is picked out of a lineup, doesn't it have to be absolutely sure that the person that they picked out of the lineup is the one they've seen before?"

"That's correct," Clapper responded.

Uebelhoer cut him off. "He really can't give you an opinion on that," she said.

Broadwater was indicted after Uebelhoer told the grand jury that a pubic hair found on Sebold's body during her rape examination matched a sample of Broadwater's hair. Then she read from the medical records, saying that Sebold had been a virgin.

When Paquette offered to show Broadwater photographs taken of Sebold on the night of the rape, as preparation for the trial, Broadwater felt tainted even being near such a crime. He refused to look at the pictures.



Paquette recommended that Broadwater choose a bench trial, because he thought it was likely that a jury would be all white. Paquette assumed that a judge, confronted with the story of a Black man raping a virginal white college student, would be more impartial.

At the trial, Broadwater was the only person to testify for the defense.

"When is the first time that you ever saw Alice Sebold?" Paquette asked him.

"Just today," he said. "Never seen her before."

He explained that he had a scar on his face and a chipped tooth, neither of which Sebold had included in her description of her rapist. But she never heard him testify, because the trial had been scheduled for the same day as her sister's college graduation. The trial date couldn't be changed, and her parents said she couldn't miss the ceremony.

The trial lasted only two days, and Sebold came for the second day. Her father, a professor of Romance languages at the University of Pennsylvania, accompanied her but mostly stayed in the lobby, reading a book in Latin. Her mother didn't come. Sebold had no friends there, either. At the time, she said, "I felt more identified with people I had met in the criminal-justice system than I did with my peers." On campus, she said, she had to pretend to be a normal student, but in the courtroom "I could exist as a person who had been raped."

Sebold felt that, in order to save herself from being murdered, she had been forced to participate in her own rape. On the witness stand, she described how she helped the man undress her; she had to kiss him and give him oral sex, so that he could maintain an erection. After he finished, "he told me that he wanted to hug me," she said. "I wouldn't come near him. So he came over and pulled me back to the wall and hugged me and apologized for that, he said, 'I am sorry, and you were a good girl.'" Then he asked her name. "I couldn't think of anything else, because I was very scared," she said. "I said 'Alice,' and he said, 'It is nice knowing you, Alice, and I will be seeing you around.'"

To draw attention to the biases inherent in the proceedings, Paquette asked Sebold, "How many Black people do you see in the room?"

"I see one Black person," she answered. Except for Broadwater, everyone in the courtroom was white.

"The whole thing made me uncomfortable," she wrote in "Lucky." "But this



"We both went through the fire," Broadwater said of him and Sebold.

wouldn't be the first time, or the last, that I wished my rapist had been white."

During a brief recess, the judge, who had four daughters, chatted with Sebold and asked about her family and what her father did for a living. Immediately after the closing statements, the judge pronounced Broadwater guilty. None of Broadwater's friends or family came to the trial. His cousin Delores said, "We knew he wasn't chosen in the lineup. We knew he didn't have a mindset to do something like that." They expected him to be acquitted. When the judge sentenced Broadwater to between eight and twenty-five years in prison, he was numb.

Sebold felt uneasy that, at the trial, she had been transformed into "a character that was already not me," she said. In court, she heard the word "virgin" so often, she said, that it "clanged in my ear." But she also felt that she'd done something important by seeing the case through. In the year after the trial, the Syracuse *Herald American* reported, the district attorney's office lost nine rape cases in a row. "There was a sense of pride," Orren Perlman, a friend of Sebold's, told me. She could have "collapsed into incredible shame, but she was really able to tolerate it and to show up."

Broadwater appealed the verdict, arguing that Sebold had a "reduced ability to perceive objects accurately due to the fear she felt during and after the attack." At the time, there was only limited recognition of the fallibility of eyewitness testimony. Since then, studies have shown that roughly a third of eyewitness identifications are incorrect, and that, when the defendant and the witness are not the same race, the witness is fifty per cent more likely to be mistaken. Broadwater argued that Sebold had "probably added the person she saw on the street in Syracuse to the mental file of her assailant." His appeal was denied.

He spent the first few months of his sentence at Great Meadow Correctional Facility, nicknamed Gladiator School, in Comstock, New York. Many of the men there had just been sentenced. "The hatred, the frustration, the pain, the disbelief—it was all manifesting," he told me. Later, he was moved to Auburn prison, where a close friend of his from Syracuse was killed in the kitchen while he stood next to him, protecting himself with a baking tray.

As a convicted sex offender, Broadwater was targeted by other prisoners. Each time he was transferred to a new prison, he said, "I would try to prevent some incident by asking, 'Hey, who's the head of the Latin Kings? Who's the head of the Aryan Nation? Listen, they need to read this.'" He would give gang leaders pages from his appeal and transcripts from his trial. "That was the only way I could really save my life," he said. At Attica prison, an imam read parts of his transcript aloud to his cell block. Preparing for the worst, Broadwater made a weapon out of tuna-fish cans that he put inside two socks. But, after the imam finished reading, men came up to him and said, "You shouldn't be in prison, man."

Sebold did not know that Broadwater had appealed his conviction. The D.A.'s office never informed her, she said, and she never followed up herself: "I thought it would be a negative thing, psychologically. I wanted to live my own life."

After college, she enrolled in the writing program at the University of Houston, to study poetry, but she felt adrift. She began doing drugs, and dropped out. She moved to Manhattan and lived in a low-income housing development in the East Village, where she often used heroin. In "Lucky," she describes her realization that she did not share her life with the students at Syracuse or with the friends she'd made in New York. "I share my life with my rapist," she wrote.

In 1989, while teaching freshman composition at Hunter College, she published an article in the *Times* titled "Speaking of the Unspeakable," which described the "degree of denial and prettification" that surrounds the crime of rape. "Even my own father, who has spent his life working with young people, confessed to me that he did not understand how I could have been raped if I didn't 'want to' be," she wrote. "I am alive but eight years later, I can still see and smell that tunnel. And eight years later, it remains true that no one wants to know what happened."

After the piece was published, Oprah

Winfrey asked Sebold to appear on an episode of her TV show devoted to rape. Onstage, Sebold looked strikingly beautiful. She wore black pants, a black blouse, and black dagger-like earrings, and her dark hair was pulled up in a high ponytail. "The reason I came today is I think the most important thing we are doing today is telling the story of individual rape victims," she said in a low, deep voice. "That's the first step in getting over all of this."

At Winfrey's request, Sebold recounted the story of seeing her rapist months after the attack.

"And so when he came up to you on the street, was it an approach to—let's go somewhere?" Winfrey asked.

"I think he was just having fun," Sebold responded. "I kept walking, because I was very scared." She added, "And then I pursued an I.D."

"I don't understand how you I.D.'d," Winfrey said.

"What do you mean?" Sebold asked.

"Because you didn't know his name," Winfrey said. "How did you find him, how did you know, I mean—"

"Right. Well he came up and walked up to me, and the policeman was there, so I told the policeman, and then we pursued from that point."

Winfrey still seemed confused. "And the policeman believed you, obviously," she said.

Three years later, Sebold learned that her *Times* essay had been quoted in "Trauma and Recovery," a groundbreaking book by the psychiatrist Judith Herman. At the time, post-traumatic stress disorder was largely seen as a syndrome affecting male combat veterans—it didn't become an official diagnosis until 1980, the year that Sebold entered college—but Herman argued that trauma could be caused by more intimate forms of violence, too. She wrote that sexual assault could provoke the same symptoms as witnessing death on the battlefield: flashbacks, dissociation, shame, social isolation, a sense of being trapped in the past. She quoted Sebold in a chapter that described how "traumatized people feel that they belong more to the dead than to the living."

Sebold felt that Herman's book explained the past decade of her life. She went to the library and spent a week reading first-person accounts by veterans of Vietnam. "Somehow, reading these men's stories allowed me to begin to feel," she wrote.

In 1990, after eight years in prison, Broadwater was granted a hearing before a parole board. "I want to prove to myself and the people in the city of Syracuse that it wasn't me," he told the board's commissioners. "I feel a crime like that every day, every night," he went on. "It hurts me, hurts me just to be convicted of a crime like that." He explained that he could have been working and saving money during these years. "I accept the fact it's going to always be with me," he told the board. His parole was denied.

Two years later, he went before the board again. He had gone to sex-offender counselling, to improve his chances of getting parole. A commissioner asked what he talked about in counselling, given his claim of innocence.

"Well, sir, the crime was done," Broadwater answered. "I was punished for it. I must live with that."

"That wasn't my question," the commissioner said. "My question is, what kind of responses do you give when the question was asked, why was this crime committed?"

"Well, sir, there is the problem," Broadwater said. "If I'm convicted of it, yes, I've been going through the stages for it, yes."

"You're still vacillating as to whether or not you committed the crime," the commissioner said. "They can't treat you unless you first come to the threshold of acknowledgment of guilt."

"Well, sir, the fact that I am guilty of being convicted of a crime—"

"No, no one is guilty of being convicted of a crime," the commissioner interrupted. "Either you're guilty of committing the crime or you're not guilty of committing the crime. You're talking in circles when you talk about being guilty of being convicted of committing a crime."

Broadwater tried to find something else for which he could accept responsibility. If he was released, he would make sure "to have all my time accountable," he said. "In case, you know, something like this arises or I be arrested or I'm being questioned for a crime again." The board denied him parole, citing the fact that he couldn't acknowledge his guilt.

Two years later, the board gave him another chance. "I presume after reading the minutes of your last Board appearance two years ago that you still maintain that you did not commit this crime," a commissioner said. "Is that correct?"

"Well, Ma'am, the last time I answered that question, I was hit with twenty-four months," he said. "I'm afraid to say anything."

"I understand that you are in a Catch-22," the commissioner said. Broadwater couldn't get accepted into additional sex-offender treatment programs, which were a requirement for parole, he was told, "because you refuse to acknowledge that you committed the crime."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"And according to what we have in front of us, you are guilty of this crime."

He was denied parole again. The commissioner concluded that "the limited sex offender programming you have participated in does not rise to a level commensurate with the severity of your crime."

On "Oprah," Sebold had explained that she could not have endured her rape "if I didn't separate myself and look down and watch." When she was thirty-two, she enrolled in the master's writing program at the University of California, Irvine, and began writing a novel about a girl named Susie Salmon, who exists in this dissociated state. After being raped and murdered in the first chapter, Susie spends the rest of the novel in Heaven, observing from above as the people she knows continue with their lives. A celestial "intake counselor" tells Susie that she can observe other people living but "you won't experience it." Susie comes to understand that "life is a perpetual yesterday."

Sebold put the novel aside when she realized that she was trying to wedge in everything she wanted to say about rape. For a long time, she'd been frustrated that, when rape appeared in literature, the crime was described through poetic deflection. She wanted to "just put it all out on the table," she said. Sebold got a grant from the university to go to Syracuse and research her rape, for a memoir. Gail Uebelhoer no longer worked in the D.A.'s office, but she met Sebold there. She pulled out a large plastic zipper bag with the underpants that Sebold had worn the night she was raped, which still had blood on them, and showed her

pictures and documents from her file. Sebold was allowed to look at only some of the material. "Gail ended up being that filter for me," she said.

In a class taught by Geoffrey Wolff, the director of the graduate fiction program, Sebold submitted the first sixty pages of what became "Lucky." "My god this is good," Wolff wrote to her in a letter. He was astonished by her ability to describe the rape's "daily intersection with your character, your choices, your ferocious will to comprehend." Her work reminded him of the "great good mystery of writing, why it matters to read, why it heals to write."

His brother is Tobias Wolff, Sebold's former professor at Syracuse. Both men had written childhood memoirs with conflicting portraits of their parents, an experience that had made Geoffrey acutely aware of the limitations of a writer's perspective. "There are always other people in that room, too," he said. But it never occurred to him that "Lucky," of which he read many drafts, should try to capture Broadwater's experience. "Shame on me," he said. "The idea that it was the wrong guy didn't enter my mind, so I didn't give a shit about his point of view."

"Lucky," which opens with a meticulous reconstruction of the rape, was published in 1999 to quiet praise. Sebold detailed her failure to discriminate between the men standing in the No. 4 and No. 5 spots in the lineup, as well as Uebelhoer's justification for her error, but readers did not publicly question her rendering of Broadwater's guilt. (In the book, she refers to Broadwater by a pseudonym.) In *Elle*, the novelist Francine Prose wrote, "Reading *Lucky*, you understand how Sebold succeeded in persuading a judge that what happened to her occurred precisely—word for word, detail for detail—the way she described it."

Three years after "Lucky" came out, Sebold, who had recently married a writer from her master's program, published her novel about Susie Salmon, "The Lovely Bones." The novel sold more than ten million copies and was adapted into a movie by Peter Jackson. The World Trade Center had just been attacked, and critics wondered if readers were perhaps uniquely receptive to the story of an innocent person who suffers a harrowing death and then learns how to adapt to the afterlife. "The response to 'The Lovely Bones' has been like a big, collective sigh of 'That's just what we needed,'" Laura Miller wrote in Salon.

"Lucky" was subsequently reissued in paperback and ended up selling more than a million copies. Sebold was surprised to learn that Uebelhoer was speaking to book clubs that were reading the memoir. Uebelhoer sent Sebold a packet of printouts about "Lucky" that she shared when she spoke with readers. "I love meeting with book clubs because it not only gets Alice's story out there," Uebelhoer wrote in an e-mail to a filmmaker, "but it also increases sales of her book!"

Paquette, Broadwater's attorney, read the memoir after hearing about it from a colleague. He was taken aback by what Uebelhoer had told Sebold about the lineup, but he said, "Twenty years later, it didn't occur to me that a chapter of a book about misconduct would be something to act on." He hadn't spoken with Broadwater since he went to prison.

In 1998, Broadwater was at the Mid-State Correctional Facility, a medium-security prison near Utica, when he was asked again to meet with the parole board. This time, he told a jail administrator that he was declining the opportunity. He understood that, unless he took blame for the rape, the parole board wouldn't release him. He had nine more years until he hit the maximum sentence.

Several months later, an officer came to his cell and told him to pack up, because he was going home. "I know you're joking," he told the officer. "Leave me alone." Broadwater figured that he had been given a disciplinary charge and was being transferred to a maximum-security prison. He gathered his legal records in a manila envelope and packed a few belongings. Then officials handed him paperwork to sign. He had been in prison for sixteen years and seven months and had reached his conditional release date, which is determined by a committee that considers a person's record in prison. "When that last gate buzzed open—Lord have mercy," he said. "You don't think you will do it, but I did what everybody does. I knelt down, and I kissed that ground. I said, 'Lord, I'm free, and I'm going to stay free for the rest of my life.'"

Broadwater was thirty-eight. He moved in with a cousin, whose mother was the only person who had regularly sent him letters while he was in prison. His father had died, and his brothers hadn't kept in touch. He applied for temp jobs, but, as a registered sex offender with a sixteen-year gap in his work history, he was rejected. He bought a nineteen-dollar shovel from a hardware store and began clearing people's driveways after snowstorms. When winter ended, he mowed their lawns.

He went to see a psychiatrist at a V.A. medical center about depression, but he was too ashamed to explain the cause of his distress: he didn't want female doctors to learn about the rape conviction and be afraid of him. He figured they'd think he was lying about his innocence. Instead, he spoke in vague terms about injustice in the world. He had nightmares and flashbacks, but, when therapists asked him to elaborate on his memories, he spoke of his mom's death or an injury in the military, leaving out the trauma that defined his life.

A year after his release, one of his cousins set him up with a woman named Elizabeth, who worked as a roofer. On their first night together, he told her that he wanted to be in a relationship with her but that she had to read his trial documents first. He slept on the couch while she spent the night in his bedroom with the transcripts. In the morning, she came into the living room where he was sleeping and said, crying, that she believed him.

They found jobs that they could do together, like roofing, janitorial, and factory work. They requested night shifts, because Broadwater wanted a potential alibi during what he called the "witching hours"—the time when most violent crimes occur. He was continually stunned that Elizabeth never left him for being a sex offender and never doubted his innocence. "That's basically how I kept my face up," he told me. But they decided not to have children, because they didn't want their child to grow up with the stigma of the crime.

He had been free for two years when the police knocked on his door, to ask him about an eighteen-year-old white woman named Jill-Lyn Euto, who had been murdered in her apartment in Syracuse. "I was scared to death," he said. "I said, 'Oh no, not me—I work from six at night to six in the morning. I'm on the

computer. I'm on camera.'" The police didn't ultimately pursue him as a suspect, but the encounter made him so afraid that he didn't want to work anywhere with female employees. He worried that he might accidentally glance at a woman in a way that would be interpreted as staring, or that he might make a gesture that appeared aggressive. "I'm always thinking, Maybe she knows," he said. "It is very painful and shameful." He became preoccupied with the mechanics of surveillance: he wanted jobs where he could punch into a clock, his movements recorded by cameras in each room. The idea of just being loose in the world, without a method of proving where he had been, was such a source of terror that sometimes he imagined he'd feel less anxiety if he was back in a jail cell.

After he had been out of prison for a few years, Elizabeth learned about "Lucky" and went to the public library to skim the book. Broadwater said, "She was trying to tell me things in the book, but I said, 'I don't want to know. It's not about me. It's what happened to her. It don't pertain to me.'"

In 2010, Jane Campion, the only woman to be nominated twice for the Academy Award for best director, called Sebold. Campion wanted to adapt "Lucky," which she had found "gripping, funny, devastating," she said. After Sebold agreed, Campion asked Laurie Parker, who had produced Campion's film "In the Cut," to write the screenplay.

Parker spent two years researching and writing the first portion of the script, which follows Sebold up to the point when she tells Tobias Wolff that she has seen her rapist. Once that part of the script had been approved, Parker began researching the next installment, which dramatized the criminal proceedings. But, after Parker read the trial transcripts, she felt disturbed that there wasn't more evidence. She had already interviewed Uebelhoer, the prosecutor, but she called her again to try to understand why the case had gone forward. Uebelhoer told Parker the same story about the lineup that Sebold narrates in "Lucky." "She also explained how few rapes made it to trial," Parker told me, "and how Alice really was a kind of Joan of Arc figure with the police, how they rallied around her, and how the judge seemed to feel fatherly toward her."

As Parker continued writing, she thought about an episode from her own life. When she was nineteen, living in San Francisco, an older man had sexually assaulted her. She became so afraid of encountering him in the city that she moved to Berkeley. Several months later, she was at a library and thought she saw the man in a study carrel. "I froze," she said. "It was a kind of out-of-body experience. I was tingling, and my face was tingling. It was the sort of terror that teleports you back to the original trauma." For about thirty minutes, she couldn't move. Finally, though, she had to leave for an appointment. As she walked out of the room, the man looked at her. "There was just no recognition at all," she said. "And then I saw it: I'm wrong. That is not the same person."

She had a "visceral but somewhat unconscious" sense, she said, that Sebold's certainty may have been unreliable, too. "Because I had experienced being wrong myself, I just had this fundamental feeling of the subjectivity of every single person involved." She didn't feel that she could write a script in which the actor shown raping Sebold appears on Marshall Street five months later. "I just felt that we couldn't perpetuate this story," she told me.

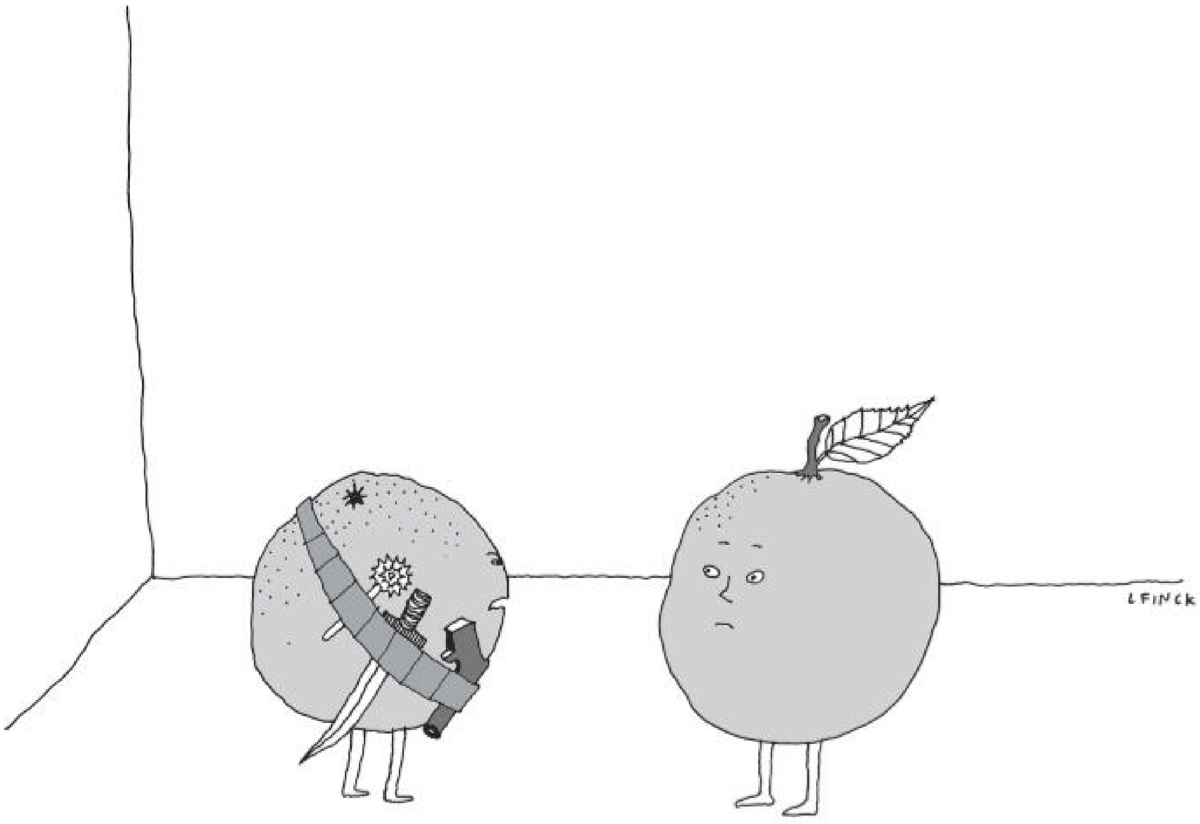
By the summer of 2014, after interviewing Paul Clapper and a few other Syracuse cops who knew about the case, Parker had reached the point where she felt that "there was so little evidence that it should not have resulted in a conviction," she said. She decided that the only way she felt comfortable telling the story was from a highly subjective point of view: the camera would be like a bird on the Sebold character's shoulder. In her script, Parker referred to the man on Marshall Street not as the rapist but as "SHORT MUSCULAR MAN," and never says if the man has been convicted. "That script had no objective perspective, no signifiers of any kind," she said.

When she submitted the script, she was told that it was not "viable." The project collapsed. Parker was a single mother, raising two children with special needs, and the movie could have transformed her career. Nevertheless, "there was a part of me that definitely didn't want to make the movie, and I'm aware of that," she said. "On some level, I probably knew that I was killing the project."

Not long afterward, Parker began volunteering in prisons, holding writing



"You know how to whistle, don't you? You just go to YouTube, search 'whistle how to,' and it's like the third video from the top."



“The peel just doesn’t feel like enough anymore.”

workshops. “I think that connection was pretty direct,” she told me. “I felt like the perspective of the person who was convicted is not present, and it should be.”

A year and a half later, James Brown, who had recently produced the Oscar-winning film “Still Alice,” signed on to adapt “Lucky.” One of his sisters had been the victim of an attempted rape, and Sebold’s memoir had reshaped his understanding of the crime. Brown enlisted Karen Moncrieff, the writer and director of two well-regarded films about violence against women, to write the script. Moncrieff, who had a close friend who’d been raped, had wanted to adapt “Lucky” since it was published. “There really has not been a film that deals with the true experience of a rape survivor in a way that’s honest, raw, unflinching and humane and isn’t engineered to titillate on some level,” she wrote to Brown in an e-mail, in 2017.

Moncrieff wrote a script that hewed closely to the book. The man that Sebold sees on Marshall Street is referred to as “RAPIST.” When he’s convicted, Sebold pours herself a shot and “suddenly lets out a celebratory *whoop!*”

But Moncrieff felt uncomfortable with the script. Since first reading the book, “something had shifted in my awareness,” she said. Although “Lucky” had been praised for breaking taboos—it was recommended by psychologists and rape counsellors, and taught in colleges—there was also something traditional about the arc of the story: Sebold became a hero fighting for justice against an evil, unknowable stranger, who would pay for what he had done to her, with little consideration of the violence or fallibility of that form of payment. Sebold described the poem she’d written in Gallagher’s workshop as a “permission slip—I could hate.” But sometimes it reads as if she is repeating lines that she’s been told, assenting to a kind of cultural belief in the redemptive power of getting revenge. The fantasy of the poem—“If they caught you”—was fulfilled. But, when they caught and punished him, she did not find the promised relief.

Before casting the rapist, Moncrieff found Broadwater’s name and photograph on a registry of sex offenders. “This guy looked really sweet,” she said. “He had the sweetest-looking eyes.” She wanted to cast someone with a similarly welcoming face, so her casting directors brought in several young Black actors to audition, a process that involved pretending to rape someone. Moncrieff viewed the videos of the auditions from her home, in Los Angeles. She had felt conflicted by the idea of showing a Black man raping a white woman, and now she was ashamed to be looking at these interchangeable Black bodies. “It was fucking painful on so many levels,” she told me. “None of these guys wanted to be there.”

In April, 2021, her casting directors recommended a young Canadian actor named Adrian Walters. On a Zoom call, she showed Walters the picture of Broadwater from the sex-offender registry. “I remember feeling so heartbroken,” Walters told me. “He just had these kind, unassuming eyes. He looked like someone I would have grown up with.” Walters read the memoir and the script and then spent a week praying about whether to accept the role. “I remember something popped up on my TV when I was in contemplation,” he said. “I heard something along the lines of ‘young Black person killed by the hands of police’ and whatnot. That was the moment where I got the sign I needed from God, saying, ‘No, you can’t do this role. This will not be of service to people who look like you.’ ”

When he explained his reasoning to Moncrieff, she decided that she could not move forward with the script. “Since going down this road, and then embarking on the reality of actually casting the part, I have tried to get with the program, but find that I just can’t,” she wrote to Brown. “That it is true doesn’t make it The Truth.”

She submitted a revised draft, which Brown accepted. In the new version, the rapist would be white.

In early June, 2021, the movie’s actors were supposed to fly to Toronto to begin shooting. Victoria Pedretti was cast as Sebold, and Marcia Gay Harden as her mom. The movie’s financier, Timothy Mucciante, was a disbarred attorney—he had spent about a decade in prison after being convicted of bank fraud and forgery of bonds—but he had been upfront about his past. Yet the funds to begin shooting never materialized. When the production team received a copy of a wire transfer from Mucciante that appeared to have been doctored—the font of the dollar signs didn’t match—he was terminated from the project, and the shooting was called off. (Mucciante said that the font was altered inadvertently.)

Not long afterward, he asked his employees to investigate the details of Sebold’s rape. James Rolfe, an associate producer for the company, said, “I told him

to drop it. We'll move on. But, as soon as control of the project was taken away from him, he wouldn't let go."

When his employees couldn't find information about the crime, Mucciante hired Dan Myers, a former sheriff who worked as a private investigator. Mucciante explained that he had doubted Sebold's story after the race of the rapist was changed in the script. "He wanted me to get him details of the actual rape—whether or not it even happened," Myers said.

Myers called Paul Clapper, the officer who had been talking to Broadwater on the street. "He mentioned the bad lineup," Myers said. Clapper suggested that the right man may not have been caught. "I got the impression that he had been dying to tell someone for quite a long time."

Broadwater was sixty and lived on the south side of Syracuse, across from a cemetery, in a house with broken windows covered by tarp. Myers found Broadwater in front of the house. He asked if Broadwater knew that people were making a movie about the woman he'd been convicted of raping.

"It's a lie," Broadwater said. "The whole conviction." He explained that, since his release, he'd been trying to find a lawyer to take his case. He'd paid three hundred dollars for a polygraph test, which he passed.

"Well, let me tell you something," Myers, who recorded the conversation, said. "Officer Clapper—you know who that is?"

When Broadwater was growing up, he responded, Clapper was an overbearing figure in the neighborhood who would "try to make you snitch."

"I talked to Clapper, and he believes in your innocence."

"No kidding!"

"The people that hired me want to help you," Myers said.

"Hell yeah." Broadwater's voice gathered strength. "I'm on board with that—hundred per cent." Broadwater said he'd give Myers all his legal documents. "This is something with my head, man, like a black shadow," he said. "Believe it or not, I want to write a book. I want to tell *my* story."

Myers shared what he'd learned with two Syracuse lawyers, Dave Hammond and Melissa Swartz, saying he believed that Broadwater was innocent. They both read "Lucky." "We were, like, Oh, my God, there's newly discovered evidence," Hammond said. What had been, for hundreds of thousands of readers, a story of justice was, in their eyes, a careful recounting of prosecutorial misconduct.

They wondered why Sebold didn't question the conviction when she was writing her book, but her confidence made more sense after they learned of Uebelhoer's involvement in researching and promoting it. Swartz, who had worked in a district attorney's office, said, "I've been on the other side, and I know the amount of trust and loyalty people feel for a prosecutor. And then that person is championing your book? It's like reaffirmation that the conviction was good."

Mucciante raised money for Hammond and Swartz to work on Broadwater's case. He also hired Red Hawk Films, a small production company, to make a documentary about Broadwater's quest to prove his innocence. It would be called "Unlucky." Broadwater signed a release giving Mucciante's company the exclusive right to his story.

When Sebold heard about Mucciante's efforts, she asked James Brown, the producer, what was happening. Brown described Mucciante's history of fraud and told Sebold, "Don't believe it. Put it out of your mind."

Swartz asked William Fitzpatrick, the Onondaga district attorney, for whom she had previously worked, to read the transcript of Broadwater's trial and give her his opinion. The transcript was so short that Fitzpatrick read it in about an hour. "I was stunned," he told me. "I couldn't believe that, in 1981, in a non-jury trial, a guy could be convicted on that."

In October, 2021, he contacted Sebold, who by then felt that she was largely "done with rape," she said. After the #MeToo movement, she felt that she could retire from the cause as a younger generation took up the work. In an e-mail, Fitzpatrick explained that Broadwater had new lawyers who were filing a motion to vacate his conviction, based on newly discovered evidence. "You have done remarkable things in removing some of the barriers encountered by sexual assault victims," he wrote. "The problem is the hair testimony." He explained that the methodology used at trial had been discredited. In 2015, in one of the country's worst forensic scandals, the Justice Department and the F.B.I. acknowledged that, for two decades, forensic examiners had been applying erroneous standards to the comparison of hairs.

Sebold wrote back a few hours later, thanking him for keeping her updated. "It sounds like Broadwater's attorney is doing the right thing on behalf of her client and that there will be many steps going forward before there is an end result one way or another," she wrote. Sebold told me, "I was very passionate in my belief that he was guilty, and the last twenty years of no one saying anything would only underscore that."

A month later, Fitzpatrick e-mailed Sebold to say that he'd had a call with Gordon Cuffy, the judge who was reviewing Broadwater's motion, and Cuffy wanted to know if the scenes in "Lucky" describing the lineup—and the commentary by Uebelhoer after it—were accurate. In those passages, Fitzpatrick explained, "the inference could be drawn that you were coached on how to handle the issue at trial which is not an ethical approach by law enforcement."

Sebold responded, "I felt an immense responsibility to portray things as truthfully as I was capable of." She believed Uebelhoer had told her details about the lineup, she wrote, because "she had a natural understanding that knowing what was happening in the case helped center and soothe me."

Five days later, Fitzpatrick e-mailed Sebold again. "After a brief hearing moments ago Judge Gordon Cuffy vacated Mr. Broadwater's conviction," he wrote. The foundation of Broadwater's conviction, Cuffy had concluded, rested on a debunked hair analysis and a lineup that had been tainted. "There is much I can wish for," Fitzpatrick went on, "not the least of which is that 40 years ago a young woman had gotten home safely to her dorm. But she didn't. So I wish you peace and happiness and comfort in knowing you never deviated from doing the right thing."

Sebold's friend Orren Perlman went to her house after the exoneration and made food for her, but she couldn't talk about what had happened. (Sebold and her husband had divorced a decade

earlier.) "It's like someone pulling a thread out of a sweater and the whole thing just falls away," Perlman said. When Sebold started to speak, "she'd be, like, 'I have to stop.' It was too much." She told her friends that she would never write again.

She tried not to look at the Internet, but she understood, from what friends shared, that she was being criticized online. It was easy to internalize the "voices of the Internet," she said, because they were amplifying "the voice that lies inside me." The headline of a *Daily Mail* story read, "She made millions off the story while he lived in windowless squalor." Perhaps there was an added level of urgency to the criticism, because it relieved the sense of group complicity—the hundreds of thousands of people who had read about Sebold's identification of Broadwater and had not been concerned. It was as if the book itself had become a kind of weathervane for where, two decades earlier, the publishing world and its readership had been in their understanding of crime and race. When pictures were published of Sebold walking her dog, carrying plastic bags for its poop, she stopped leaving her house. Friends took the dog, so that Sebold wouldn't have to go outside.

Eight days after the exoneration, Sebold, whose agent had found a crisis-communications consultant to help her, sent a one-page apology to Broadwater's lawyers, and then posted it on Medium. "I am sorry most of all for the fact that the life you could have led was unjustly robbed from you, and I know that no apology can change what happened to you and never will," she wrote. "My goal in 1982 was justice," she went on. "Certainly not to forever, and irreparably, alter a young man's life by the very crime that had altered mine." Bitch Media published an article titled "The Infuriating Failure of Alice Sebold's Apology," criticizing her for writing sentences in the passive voice. An article in UnHerd was titled "Alice Sebold's Empty Apology: I've Never Believed a Word She's Written." On the day that she published her apology, Scribner, which had legally vetted the book and reissued it in 2017, announced that it would stop distributing "Lucky."

Broadwater had assumed that Sebold knew about his attempts to prove his innocence, and just didn't care, but when he learned that no one had kept her abreast of his legal ordeal he felt less at odds with her. A wrongful conviction leaves wreckage in more than one direction. "I thank the good Lord I made it to a point where I'm strong enough mentally to say, 'Hey, it was the court. It was the system. It's not the victim's fault,'" he told me.

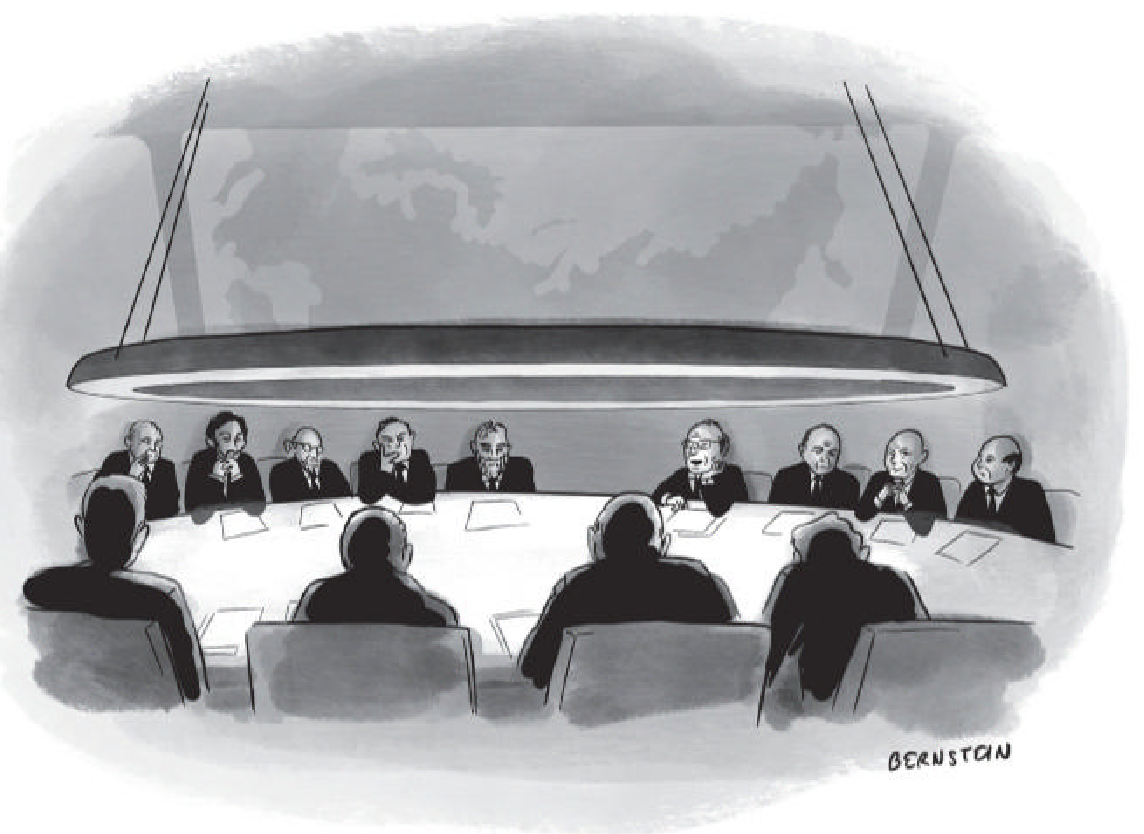
Sebold had written that she shared her life with her rapist, but she had also foisted a kind of unchosen intimacy on a different man. The unspeakable nature of rape, which Sebold struggled with for many years, had become Broadwater's burden, too. When people congratulated him on the exoneration, he said, they seemed not to realize that "I still carry the crime." He never uses the word "rape." "I won't say exactly what it was," he told me, "because that word is perplexing and humiliating, and it's too hard on people."

By the end of December, 2021, the "Unlucky" documentary had come to a halt. The crew refused to continue working, saying that they'd gone for more than a month without being paid and were owed nearly a hundred thousand dollars. (Mucciante said that he was withholding funds because he deemed some expenditures improper, among other reasons.)

Broadwater cut off contact, after a lunch meeting in which it seemed that Mucciante was focussed on the market value of a wrongful-conviction story. "I'd been thinking he was out for the goodness of proving my innocence, not knowing he had another agenda—profit, stuff like that," Broadwater said.

Brown, the producer of the movie "Lucky," wondered if whatever psychological characteristics had made Mucciante capable of conning people had also made him a different kind of reader. "I think that normal people who are equipped to feel empathy read the first chapter about Alice's rape—the most unimaginable horror you could possibly imagine—and become so fully on Alice's side that you don't pay attention to detail," he said. "But he could see through the emotional clutter of the experience."

Sebold has a box in her house labelled "R," for rape, where she keeps documents from the criminal proceedings, as well as her journals from that time. For the past year and a half, she has wanted to open it and reread the material but she finds that she can't. Several times, when I asked about her memories of the trial—how she made sense of her certainty as an eighteen-year-old, for instance—she would try very hard to answer, straining to offer a helpful remark, but she would seem to shut down. She could discuss the exoneration on a broader level, but "it's the details," she said. "It's the finding out of



"Has anyone been watching anything good?"

the details. I can't dive into it without losing a sense of who I even am. My perceptions of other people, my trust in myself. That I can fuck up so badly and not even know it."

Broadwater was disappointed that Sebold had not yet asked to meet him in person, but Sebold said that, when it comes to "identity destruction," she was pacing herself: she is working on sending him a letter first. She wants to directly confront the enormity of his trauma, which she said makes her own troubles feel comparatively small, but she is also aware that her brain is not yet in the place that she wishes it were in, to be ready for those granular details. From remarks that Broadwater made after the exoneration, she sensed that, despite everything he'd been through, he was a remarkable person, a fact that had made her feel both better and worse. In a room together, after forty years, Broadwater hoped to "compare notes," so that he could understand how the district attorney's office "duped her and kept her blind." When she envisioned the meeting, she expected that language would fail. "We might do nothing but stare at the floor or weep," she said.

I thought that perhaps Sebold would have to repopulate her rape with a new face, to keep the memory intact, but she said she'd given up on the idea of narrative closure. She knew there was talk of other suspects who might have been her real rapist—"the ghost in this horror story," as she described him—but she wasn't sure she needed to know. She and Broadwater had both "gone from twenty years old to sixty years old in this time," she said. "What most people consider the prime of their life has started and finished." The window for making sense of it all through a story was over.

The philosopher Susan Brison, in "Aftermath," a book about her rape, describes how trauma "introduces a 'surd'—a nonsensical entry—into the series of events in one's life." In the years after she was raped, Brison was always trying to keep the story of her attack straight, both to make sure that her rapist was found guilty and to regain a sense of control and coherence. In the book, she asks if holding on to one tight narrative may, "if taken too far, hinder recovery, by tethering the survivor to one rigid version of the past." She wonders if, after mastering the story, "perhaps one has to give it up, in order to retell it, without having to 'get it right,' without fear of betraying it."

Sebold had always defined herself as a " 'books saved my life' person," she said, but, since the exoneration, she had found it impossible to "return to the place where I perceive words as inherently kind and playful." Making sense of her trauma through writing was supposed to help make Sebold feel whole, a wish her writing professors encouraged, but, at a crucial moment when she was eighteen, her faith in literature may have got in the way of her ability to see and judge what was in front of her. Narratives about trauma can restore meaning so that the "surd" doesn't just sit there, destroying a person's beliefs about the world. But they can also provide unrealistic clarity, creating too singular a point of view, symmetries that don't exist. "What I thought was the truth and wrote about as the truth—which then was validated year after year for 20+ years as a never out-of-print title—was not only NEVER the TRUTH, but the truth resided with Anthony B," Sebold wrote to me. "He and his loved ones have held a lonely vigil all along."



Shortly after his exoneration, Broadwater sued the State of New York for wrongful imprisonment. He also filed a federal lawsuit for violation of his civil rights. "While a defendant would normally be left to speculate as to how a victim can pick out the wrong individual at a lineup but then be permitted to explain why they did so," the state lawsuit said, "the victim here published a book explaining in detail the events just after the lineup."

In February, the state settled with Broadwater, for five and a half million dollars. He and Elizabeth are looking to buy a house. They want about ten acres of land, in the country, near Syracuse. Previously, only a handful of friends had ever invited Broadwater and Elizabeth over. Now neighbors were stopping by their house throughout the day. One of Broadwater's brothers, whom he hadn't heard from in more than a decade, had invited them to stay at his house. "I tell her, 'There's another reason and purpose for them inviting us now,'" Broadwater said, when I met him and Elizabeth at Hammond's law office, in downtown Syracuse.

Since the exoneration, little in Broadwater's life has changed. He still has a self-imposed curfew of 7 P.M., unless he is working. "I have to prevent myself from being in harm's way," he told me. Recently, when a student at Syracuse University was assaulted, he called his lawyer, panicked that he might become a suspect. "You get tense, you start sweating, and then the adrenaline comes," he said.

When I described Sebold's sense that he was a remarkable person, he and Elizabeth began crying so hard that it took several minutes for them to start speaking again. I mentioned that Sebold wanted to write a letter to him. "I think it needs to be face to face," Elizabeth said, barely audibly. "If she's comfortable with it."

"I guess starting out with a letter would be pretty nice," Broadwater said. When Sebold wrote about her experience, he added, she should know that "I was part of it—whatever she's recollecting, each day and moment, I experienced it, too. I don't think I can judge her pain, but I know that for me it was war," he said, referring to the violence in prison. "I tell Liz, 'I'm not normal,'" he said.

Broadwater said that his psychiatrist at the V.A. center often asked him if he had suicidal thoughts, and recently it occurred to him that he no longer had to worry as much about being there for Elizabeth: she would be O.K. without him, because she could live on the money from the settlement.

"Hmm," Elizabeth said, sharply.

"My psychiatrist says, 'Don't think like that,'" he said.

Since his exoneration, Broadwater had finally been able to confide in his psychiatrist without worrying about whether his story would be believed. He could share the memories that were really haunting him. "Doubt," he said softly. "It creeps in and goes back out." ♦

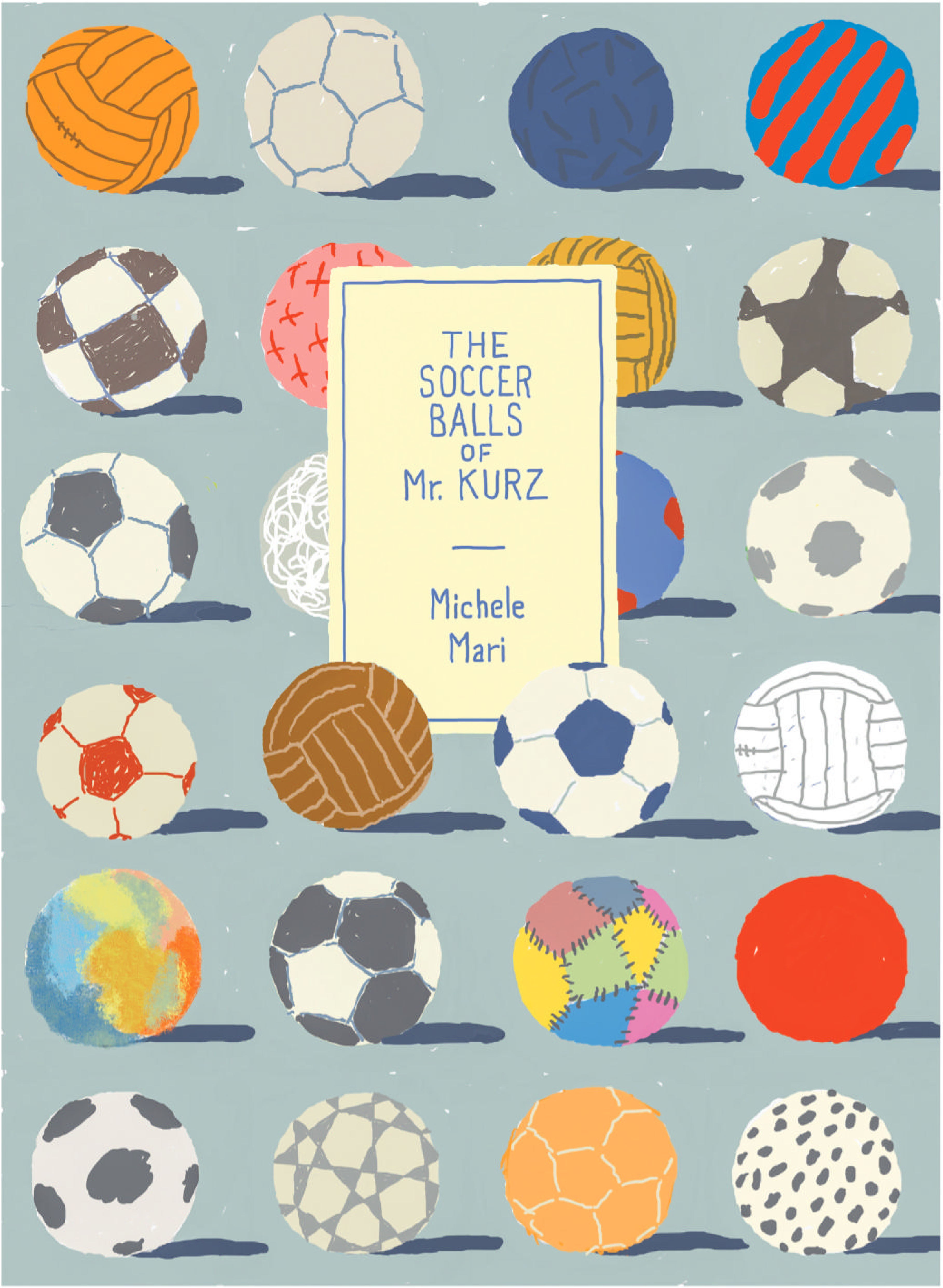


ILLUSTRATION BY GUIDO SCARABOTTOLO

For Bragonzi, the only beautiful thing in the sad life of the boarding school in Quarto dei Mille was the soccer matches. And yet even that beauty was anguished. He realized it as early as the first match, when he saw that, once the moment came to shoot, even the best, even the oldest players suffered a kind of muscular contraction, as if forcing themselves to hold back; and, in fact, what emerged was a weak, uncertain shot, which the goalie blocked with ease. And to think that a second earlier that same forward had seemed full of confident vigor, impetuously swooping down onto the ball, defending it, rushing with long strides toward the goal area—but then . . . but then that feeble shot.

Only at the third match did he make up his mind to ask, after he'd happened to give a hard kick and the ball, flying upward, just barely missed going over to the other side, beyond the wall that constituted the end of the schoolyard: "Aaaah . . ." all the little boys groaned in chorus, covering their eyes with their hands, and when the ball fell back down into the schoolyard, rather than rejoicing, they rebuked Bragonzi bitterly. "But why? What did I do wrong?" he asked Paltonieri as they went back inside for snack time. "And even if the ball did go over, why make such a big deal about it?"

And so Paltonieri explained. He said that on the other side of the wall lived a Mr. Kurz, whom no one had ever seen but who must have hated all the boarding-school children, because whenever the ball ended up on his side he never gave it back (as is civil and urbane custom: you've sent it hurtling over there and now you anxiously wait, speculating by the wall, and, lo, by silent miracle it returns, tracing its trajectory in the sky, returning, returning—and with your heart overflowing with gratitude you give resounding thanks: "Thank you!" you say, you don't know to whom, but you say it. Or else the miracle is delayed, and you walk away uncertainly, saddened by the game's forced end; but when you come back the following morning the ball is there in the yard, for how long you don't know, and so your "thank you" is all the more heartfelt, because you only think it, addressing it to the past). Not only that, but vain would have been any attempt to get the ball back; at least this was what was claimed by the young Instructresses, who, a long time ago, caving to universal insistence, had gone over to speak to Mr. Kurz. "Mr. Kurz is well within his rights," they apparently relayed with an air of annoyance, "and can keep whatever makes its way into his yard." Such a response, noted Paltonieri, who had heard the story from Morchiolini, sent the message that the Instructresses hadn't put much of an effort into their mission: if only the boys could have gone themselves, just once, to speak to that man, maybe they would have convinced him, maybe he would have yelled at them a little, sure, but in the end he would have given back all the balls confiscated that year and, who knows, even in previous years. But nothing could be done, the rules barred the boys from leaving the school, and, besides, what would be the point? Mr. Kurz had said no to them, and they were schoolmistresses—never mind a bunch of snot-nosed kids! For that matter, the Instructresses had added, from that day forward they would not be going back to see that man. They had a sense of dignity, they did, and they weren't interested in being humiliated by someone who—they stressed with a hint of sadism—happened to be correct!

Of course, Paltonieri continued, if the school had been endowed with an ample supply of soccer balls, there would be nothing to get upset about in all this; if they lost one they could requisition another, and Mr. Kurz could do as he pleased. But the reality was that an endowment of balls not only wasn't ample but wasn't even provided for, and the boys had to make do with the odd privately owned ball. "Do you understand what this means?" Paltonieri pressed Bragonzi, now thoroughly worked up. "It means having to keep tabs on the new kids, the ones who've just arrived with a suitcase full of toys, and hope that they have a ball, and, if they do, persuade them to lend it to us, giving them gifts, which is already enough to make them suspicious, maybe the ball is new and so they guard it jealously, and if you try to take it away from them they squeal and then the Instructresses come running, understand? And when you've finally convinced them—you've given them heaps of trading cards and comics, promised them they'll also get to play, even if they're so little they don't have a clue what a soccer match is—when finally it's all worked out and the game begins, *pow!*, some idiot kicks the ball over the wall, and we're ruined. And it's not even possible to get our parents to buy balls when they come to see us and take us to Genoa, because visiting days are on Sunday and everything's closed . . . You know today's ball, the one you almost sent over to the other side? It's Randazzo's, and to get it he had to write to his dad a month ago, telling him to bring it last Friday, and his dad lives in Messina and only comes twice a year, understand?"

Bragonzi understood, and he understood, too, that theirs would never be real matches but monstrosities, unnerving endeavors in which, more than the struggle between the two teams, what counted was the unspoken battle being played between all of them and that cruel man lying in wait. As months passed, this image grew and grew in Bragonzi's mind, and he became accustomed to thinking of Mr. Kurz as an enormous black spider, motionless in the middle of his yard but lightning fast when pouncing on the balls that fell like fat insects into his web: then, seizing them with his foul legs, horrifically he sucked till there was naught left but the floppy remains . . . This rapacity was the scariest thing of all, because it enveloped the soccer ball even before it went over the wall, beckoning it and infecting it with a bluish leprosy, so that playing with it was a bit like contracting that disease, or like conversing with a man condemned to death; at other times, it seemed to him that the ball was a beautiful woman promised in marriage to a jealous tyrant, and that terrible torments awaited the reckless fool who dared so much as to graze her.

It was but little consolation that he now played on a permanent basis for the Weenies. Dividing all the boys into Champs and Weenies had been thought up by Saniosi, whose intellect, faced with the impossibility of resolving the problem of Mr. Kurz, had at least

conceived of a way to transform that nightmarish presence from a paralyzing element into an active part of the game. What he proposed was simple, and founded on the eradication of switching sides at halftime: the Weenies would always shoot at the goal chalked on the dormitory wall, the Champs at the one on the wall separating the schoolyard from Mr. Kurz; that way, Saniosi thought, the fear of losing the ball would hinder the Champs, weakening their abilities and thus levelling the playing field. And so it was—but for the fact that they all wanted to be welcomed into the ranks of the Weenies, and to this end deliberately tripped themselves up, displayed profound shortcomings in technique never previously revealed, spread their legs wide open so as to garner the supreme humiliation of the nutmeg. It became necessary to form a tribunal of memory keepers, who by punctiliously citing past dribbling and counterattacks, crosses and headed goals, forced the Champs to face, with no chance of appeal, their own talent.

So Bragonzi was a Weenie, but this didn't prevent him from noticing during the games—almost absorbing it from the uncertain looks in the eyes of the Champs—a general sense of distress. This feeling only worsened after the episode with Lamorchia.

It happened as follows: For an agonizingly long week, the boys were left without a ball, to rave, bored, in the emptiness. Then, on Sunday, Tabidini's dad took his son to Genoa. Seeing him heave a sigh in front of the lowered shutter of a toy store, he questioned the boy and, finding out the truth, gave a good long laugh; then, without another word, he took his son by the hand and pulled him along until they reached the nearest park, where several gangs of children were playing ball. "Which would you like?" he asked, encompassing in a single wave of his hand that entire swarm.

"What do you mean, 'which'?" gulped Tabidini, who had understood perfectly.

"Don't you worry about it. There must be a ball here that tickles your fancy more than the others, no?"

Tabidini observed: over here, the children were gratifying themselves with an unsizable rubber sphere, colorful and flabby, the kind for little kids; another group, right behind them, was scrambling around a ball that was more serious but also deflated—you could tell from the noise it made and from its pitiful bounce. Tabidini looked beyond the drinking fountain: over there was the biggest showdown, with at least ten players per side, and the ball was sound, but lightweight, too, made of taut plastic, one of those balls which shoot up bizarrely, almost taking flight of their own volition, no, no, too dangerous, a real shame, though; to their left, in a completely grassless area, enshrouded in an earthy cloud, six desperately lanky dawdlers were playing with a dirt-colored ball of an indecipherable nature; he looked at them more closely—they didn't have "the goods" and were playing in loafers, their long socks pulled up to their knees, a scraping of soles, a slip-sliding amid expletives. Tabidini waited for the ball to emerge for an instant from the dust cloud to observe it more carefully: huh, it was leather, one of those prehistoric hand-stitched balls, with a wide valve like a ten-lira coin and that nutty color which had been vanquished long ago by black-and-white, weighty and lumpy and somewhat pear-shaped, of a mineral substance that had been chemically enriched over the years with mud and emotions . . . Headaches and blackened nails lay in store for the imprudent soul who opted for that ball, no



thank you, better take a look at that other group in the field all the way at the far end; he asked his father for permission to go, then walked through the park until he was close enough to taste this new match—a match into which fathers and sisters had been frivolously mixed, a match that was revolving, alas, around an exceedingly light beach ball, literally lighter than a feather, a complimentary item included with the purchase of sunscreen for the sportily benighted. Disheartened, Tabidini went back to his dad, with one last glance at some other pilgrims who were blissfully delighting—poor fools!—in a felt tennis ball.

"Well, then?"

Tabidini was about to reply that he wasn't exactly spoiled for choice when he was distracted by the simultaneous arrival of four cars, then of two more right after. Out of them came twenty or so older adolescents in tracksuits, loaded with gym bags and duffelbags. It was enough for one of them to tweak his hamstring muscles, tenderizing them a bit, for Tabidini, melting with emotion, to understand: yes, he didn't need to see over it to know what was behind the park's high gray wall, the group's clear destination. A real soccer field! A real match! he thought, now liquefied, just as one of the last adolescents, having rested his duffel on the ground, pulled out a plastic bag, which he opened and then put back down, laying bare its contents: shimmering in the morning light of the sun, so new and untouched as to appear enamelled, flawlessly round, soft and taut at once, planet of glory, the most beautiful soccer ball Tabidini had ever seen. Propelled by an irrepressible impulse, he slipped his chubby hand out of his father's and started to run toward the player, who had remained behind his companions and was now meticulously closing his duffelbag. As soon as he was close enough to make out the words, Tabidini stopped, and he read, "World Cup." Oh! His heart skipped a beat. And then, right below, in a different pentagon, "Official Soccer Ball—Patented—Licensed—Tested," and slightly lower still, "No. 3." But what made Tabidini's eyes bulge out of his head was the signature, the fluttering signature stamped along the length of two other pentagons (at first glance he didn't want to believe it, looked more closely at the squiggle—but, yes, it was true, beyond a shadow of a doubt): "George Best." Best! Best's soccer ball! The greatest player of them all! The legend who was invoked after every intoxicating mazy run! At school, they'd only ever had one ball with a name on it: "Totonno Juliano," it was called, it even bore Juliano's picture, though the product was made of plastic, brought back from Naples by Fiorillo—a good

ball, but nothing more, and, in any event, after just a few days it became the prey of Mr. Kurz. But this one! And Best's, to boot! Desperately he turned toward his father, who started to walk over. Meanwhile, the adolescent, giving a shout to his companions, sent the ball their way, essentially inviting them to have a taste. Tabidini was no stranger to that weakness, that yielding to the temptation to try out a new ball while still off the field and out in the street, despite knowing full well that the rough concrete would leave a mark on its lustre—as if the owner, unable to bear so much perfection, wanted to artificially dirty and age the ball in order to finally recognize it as his own.

Mr. Tabidini knew his son. Without saying a word, he trotted over to the youngsters, whom he reached right at the little iron gateway in the wall. At a distance, his son watched them talk: his father on one side, the others curved around him in a semicircle, their bags placed on the ground. They were shaking their heads, gesticulating nervously. Then his father took his wallet out of his jacket and started sliding out bills. The players shook their heads some more; then, seeing that he was still pulling out bills, they started to discuss the matter among themselves. One of them moved off, gesturing as if to tell another to go to hell, though he soon came back. Now Tabidini's dad was standing there in silence; one guy came right up to him, shaking his fists, but three others grabbed him and shoved him out of the group. The discussion continued until Tabidini's father finally stuck his fingers back into his wallet. When Tabidini saw one of the players pick the ball up and hand it to his father, he thought he was dreaming. Kissed by the sun as he walked back (the adolescents, behind him, went on gesticulating and arguing), Tabidini's father looked like a paladin returning with the Grail.

That evening, in a jubilant riot of oohs and ahs, Tabidini was greeted as a hero by the entire boarding school, and every boy, before falling asleep, fantasized in his bed about the match announced for the following day. So radiant was the image of George Best that, for one night, there was no room in their heads for Mr. Kurz.

What followed was something horrific, and each boy found himself suddenly older. Bragonzi was left with the special sorrow of having failed to touch the ball even once. It was only a minute into the game, the Champs were on the attack, when the ball rebounded and went soaring into the air like a sublime bird: in everyone's consciousness it came back down in slow motion, while below a roaring, elbowing melee raged. In the general confusion, no one noticed Lamorchia—only Bragonzi saw him getting ready to kick a volley: "No! No!" he shouted, or maybe he merely thought it, while the ball descended with unreal slowness, and already that kid was slanting, twisting his upper body and rearing back his right leg, already he was bending his knee as he lifted his shoe off the ground, "No! No!" not like this, not in the air, let it bounce, but Lamorchia couldn't hear him, it was as though he were being drawn heavenward, ankle first, every sensory faculty now transferred to that ascending ankle, into that outward thrust that is called an instep. Abandoning the man he was marking, Bragonzi dived into the melee toward Lamorchia, imploring him all the while, sending him messages, and then, in a flash, everyone realized, and froze as if turned to stone, limbs caught and tangled, and, unable to give voice, each one thought inside himself, Don't do it, don't do it, no one daring to look at Lamorchia's ankle, looking only at his swooning eye, captivated by his bliss and at the same time horrified . . . *Pow!* went the ball as it was struck from too low and from the side, rising once again, though no longer vertically, rather in an excruciating, mournful trajectory: Best's soccer ball fell precisely on the flat top of the wall, taking everyone's breath away, and then, after an imperceptible stasis, it plunged down definitively on the other side, and became the property of Mr. Kurz.

No one did Lamorchia any harm, because the harm was locked in their hearts. Lamorchia himself, for that matter, was never the same after that day, nor did he ever again wish to play soccer: he could be seen off at the edge of the field, sitting like a pensioner warming himself in the afternoon sun, and when the ball wound up in his vicinity, and shouts of "Ball!" were directed at him from the field, he would pick it up, but, not having the courage to kick or throw it, he would



"Jerry, you're on my side of the bed again."

carry it all the way to the center of the field, squeezing it to his chest, and, once there, set it down with care.

Six months had passed since that day, during which at least twelve balls had made their way to Mr. Kurz. Then, tired of so much heartache, the boys ceased to play except with balls of knotted rags, which had the advantage of never leaving the ground: monstrous turbans that kept up the fiction of sphericality for no more than half an hour before starting to unravel, coarse comets dragging a tail of dusty tatters. After four months of this punishing humiliation, Bragonzi stopped one fine fall day in the middle of a rightward attack, and amid general protest grabbed that simulacrum of a ball in his hands.

"Companions, friends," he would have said if he had been an ancient tribune, "consider who we are, who we have been, and, gazing upon yourselves in this ignominious rag as in a mirror, may you hence derive sufficient shame to spur you to redeem a life perhaps not yet lost to the cause of Soccer. Think of those who, scorning danger, preceded us on this selfsame field, and let it conjure within you those Greats in whose shadow all of us, in regrettably distant days of yore, sought to shape ourselves: Tumburus, Fogli, Mora, Pascutti, Bobby Charlton, Chinesinho, Del Sol. They are watching us—and do we not shudder? And yet we hesitate?"

His words were not these, naturally, but this was the spirit, and the result—judging by the gritting of teeth—was no different from the one such a speech would have inspired. And so war was declared, but for the moment, needing also to fight on the internal front with the Instructresses, and not knowing what they would find on the other side of the wall, they limited their actions to the launching of a reconnaissance mission. In the insanity of the hour, everyone volunteered, but it was unanimously decided that if there was one among their number to whom the honor of that mission was rightfully owed it was Bragonzi. To decide who would join him, they proceeded to draw lots, from which emerged the names of Tabidini and Sieroni.

At two o'clock that night, Bragonzi slid out from under his covers and, feeling his way along the walls in the dark, came to the end of the hallway, where their Instructress's bedroom lay. He knocked three times, and when she opened the door, dishevelled and furious and searching in the shadows for whoever the pest was, he said in one breath, "Quick, come, Tabidini is unwell!" While she ran to the afflicted, though not before covering her shoulders with a shawl, Bragonzi infiltrated her room and rummaged through everything (resisting the distraction of stockings and lace) until he found the coveted bunch of keys. Then, after hiding them in a carefully selected spot in the bathroom, he went back into the dormitory, giving the agreed-upon signal to Tabidini, who promptly ceased his stertorous gurgling.

An hour later, when silence reigned anew, Bragonzi and Sieroni got dressed and slipped like thieves to the bathroom, and, with the keys retrieved, were now masters of the boarding school. First, they opened the janitor's closet, grabbing a flashlight and a handsome collection of screwdrivers; then, after unlocking two other doors, they exited onto the field, and suddenly (or was it only a shiver from the freezing air?) it was as though Mr. Kurz could see them. One last door, to the gardener's shed, and they came into possession of a long ladder. Bragonzi tried his best not to think about what he was doing, and, actually, thanks to a hint of fever, he was aware of it all as though he were already remembering it, as though it were a thing of the past: the ladder, which was slightly shorter than the wall; the struggle to stand it upright like an Egyptian obelisk; Sieroni hesitating, owing to an onset of second thoughts, which resulted in a necessary rebuke; his own frightening ascent, rung after rung, with the terror of spotting over the top of the wall the first of the eight hairy legs; his precarious balancing act up at the top followed by the work of lifting the ladder and lowering it on the other side, first pushed from below by

HIGH ROMANCE

And then Keats's ghost found
that he could no longer love
Fanny Brawne. He'd escaped
the body like a love
letter from its envelope, and he'd flown
like a love letter in a windstorm.
He'd seen that the words
formed from ink melted in the rain.
Words, he now knew—and he'd once been
such a devotee—didn't matter,
or didn't matter so much as he'd believed
they mattered. Something mattered, he knew,
but whatever it was he couldn't put
words to it, or he didn't have the heart
to put words to it. He did feel love,
but it was an arrow without a target.
It was diffuse, like an atomized
perfume, or stars as the poor see them,
who cannot afford glasses. He saw
that Fanny, as she was known,
was a concept, just as he had been a concept.
They each inhabited the same amount
of space, like a tablespoon
of butter and a tablespoon of lard.
In a book, they would each occupy
a single page. Their brains, encased
in cranial bones and flesh and heads of hair,

could each rest on a single silk pillow.
Ideas, he found, don't die. Even notions fly
like cottonwood seeds through the air.
And love had been a notion. He saw
that Fanny, in time, would slip free of herself—
everything does, in time, even roses,
even stones, foothills, fleas, and poems.
Rhyme, he saw, existed on its own behalf.
He could catch it like a bird catches
an air current. From above, he could see
that Fanny was not trifling. Nothing,
from above, is trifling, nor more compelling
than anything else. His love for her, he saw,
had been an invention of the mind.
Only belief could sustain it, but he
could no longer sustain belief. Now
and then he'd try it on again—love—
like a fancy hat he could not afford
and now appeared ludicrously overdesigned.
Once, his ghost managed to look at her again,
through the gauzy curtains that hung
over her bedroom window. His gaze
was too objective to find her beautiful,
but objectivity itself—that was beautiful.

—*Diane Seuss*

Sieroni then held solely with his own strength; the cold air on his face and the impossibility of seeing anything whatever on Mr. Kurz's side; Sieroni's whimpering invitation to turn back; and, at last, his descent into the darkness below.

After landing in Kurz's yard, Bragonzi stood a long while in silence, until, all being quiet, he finally turned on the flashlight. The yard was small, much smaller than the school's, and not paved. Here, then, on this earth, was where the balls fell. In front of him, a low house, two stories, its windows shut: Kurz's house. The yard was bordered on the sides by two walls that were as tall as the one he had just climbed, but along the left wall ran a strange, glimmering structure. Bragonzi approached it and saw that it was made of glass, with leaded panes: Kurz's greenhouse. He tried to look inside, but the glass offered back only the flashlight's glow. The perfect place to hide the ladder, he thought, for if Kurz sees it I'm a goner. His next thought was that the screwdrivers would now come in handy, but there was no need for them: the little door to the greenhouse was closed by a latch with no padlock, and that things could be so easy immediately brought back to mind the ghastly mouth of the spider.

Having flung the door wide, Bragonzi dragged and then pushed the ladder inside, making sure to erase the grooves left on the ground: he had seen this done in movies by American Indian women to the tracks of their shining warriors. Now that he was shut inside the greenhouse, he turned the flashlight back on to better conceal the ladder, and he saw them. He saw all of them, all at once, and with them the generations, the jerseys, the hopes, the dashes and dives.

The greenhouse was filled with three long shelving units, two units on the sides and one in the center, like a kind of backbone, resulting in two parallel corridors; each had seven rows of shelves, each row a continuous line of flowerpots, each pot holding a soccer ball. Slightly larger in diameter than the pots, the balls protruded by three-fourths, touching one another at the sides like the segments of a monstrous caterpillar. Stunned, unsure whether to be horrified or to rejoice, his heart rioting in his chest, Bragonzi moved closer and focussed the beam of light on the first ball on the shelf to his left. It was an incredibly old ball, more gray than brown, completely peeled and with several unstitched seams. He touched it: the coarsest thing he had ever felt. There was something written on the pot in black block letters, faded with time: "May 8, 1933." Bragonzi was trembling. He shone the light on the next ball: this one looked worn out like an old sweater, and, busted, dented, and covered in tarlike stains, it had sunk deeper than the others into its pot; here, too, the pot bore a faded inscription: "November 13, 1933." It's a dream, Bragonzi thought, refusing to understand. He slowly went down the corridor, moving the beam of light: February 4, 1934, April 28, 1934, May 16, 1934, June 2, 1934, June 18, 1934, August 3, 1934, September 3, 1934 . . . then eight balls from 1935, six from 1936, ten from 1937, seven from 1938, five from 1939, none from 1940 to 1945, twelve from 1946, sixteen from 1947 . . . Could it be? He turned from the shelves on the left, and, pointing the light at the central unit, immediately read, "July 21, 1956." This one was a double shelf, each pot corresponding to a pot facing the opposite side; here he ran breathlessly, and read at random, "March 7, 1960," "August 11, 1961." And, finally, the shelves on the right, full of orbs from 1963, from '64, from '65, from '66 . . . Overcome, he sped up his pace as he moved down the aisle, toward the back, where he knew what he would find . . . He would find Fermenti's soccer ball, the very first one he had seen go flying over to the other—to this—side, and Randazzo's ball, there they were! and the "Totonno Juliano" (there! "March 9, 1967," yes, that was the day it had happened), and his own, his red-and-black beloved, it was there, too (he was about to take it but withdrew his hand), and all the others up to Best's, there it was! shining more brightly than the rest in the glow of the flashlight, still unblemished and new-smelling, and then all the lost balls up to the day

of the conversion to rags, not one was missing, oh, dearest soccer balls! But what sent a shudder running through his entire body was what he saw after the last ball, even if he could have imagined it beforehand: a line of empty pots, ready to welcome new arrivals . . .

He contemplated at length the emptiness of those pots, successively lighting up their interiors, and he wondered where, in that precise moment, the balls destined to fill them were, in what storeroom or window display, and wondered, too, when they would rain down like ripe fruits from over the wall, on what date, a sixteenth of October or a twentieth of March—impossible to say. For now, the boys played with balls made of rags, but someday things would go back to normal, it was inevitable, and on that day Mr. Kurz would be happy once more. What did he think of the temporary suspension of soccer balls? Maybe from the more muffled sound of their kicks he had figured out the truth and was awaiting his hour, as he had since 1933.

Bragonzi returned to the front of the greenhouse and stood before that first ball: looking at it, and thinking that those who had played with it must be older than his father by now, he considered how the balls with which an individual plays in his life get lost in thousands of ways, rolling down countless streets, landing in rivers and on rooftops, torn apart by the teeth of dogs or boiled by the sun, deflating like shrivelled prunes or exploding on the spikes of gates, or simply disappearing, you thought you had them and you look all over but they're nowhere to be found, who knows how much time has passed since you lost them or since someone swiped them at the park; he considered how all of the balls touched by those children had thus dissipated, and if he were in their presence and asked them, "Where are all your soccer balls?" they would shrug, unable to account for the fate of a single one. That ball alone had been snatched from the clutches of destruction; only that ball, from May 8, 1933, went on being a ball. Oh, he knew all too well how things had unfolded, for how many times had he witnessed the same scene! The ball had shot upward, and even before it went over the wall everyone thought, It's lost—goodbye, ball. But no, only in that moment was it saved. And many years later, when all those children went down into their graves, that ball would be more alive than them, the last memory of the matches of yesteryear.

Bragonzi passed one more time through the entire collection, observing more closely some spheres that he hadn't noticed before: a hard and clumpy one resembling a truffle, a still pristine one on which was written "From Grandma, to her sweet pea," a rubber one with the faces of the players who had died in the Superga air disaster, one with Hamrin's signature forged by an uncertain juvenile hand. And he noticed something else, which brought a lump to his throat: Mr. Kurz had arranged each ball in its pot so as to look its best, the least dented or unstitched part forward, the part with the faces or signatures, as though he loved those soccer balls.



"It doesn't work on geese."

The glow of the flashlight kept growing dimmer, and so Bragonzi decided to turn it off for a little while. In the darkness, after a few seconds had passed, the silhouettes of the soccer balls began to appear like fluorescent spectres, first the whiter ones, then slowly but surely the rest, and it seemed to Bragonzi that they were quivering, and that they wanted to say something. Concentrated in that luminescence was the first glimmer of morning, as yet imperceptible in the sky. Before long it would be dawn (had he been in the greenhouse for that long?), and Bragonzi didn't know what to do, whether to turn the flashlight back on and keep looking around, or get out of there, or scope out other areas of the yard. Instead he carried on as before, wandering slowly up and down those two corridors, one moment laying his hands on an orb whose pentagons looked like black fish in a pitcher of water, the next on a globe of gaseous yellow.

The first light of sunrise took him by surprise and convinced him that he should go back. He dragged the ladder to the foot of the wall after being assailed by a gust of freezing air upon leaving the greenhouse. Then, just as he was about to climb the ladder, he noticed something in the middle of the yard, something that had been hidden before in the dark. He moved closer: it was a wooden chair with a wicker seat, turned to face the boarding school. Oh, it didn't take much to understand what the person who sat in it waited for, and Bragonzi shivered at the thought of him sitting there, motionless, patient, day after day from morning till night, saddened by the fruitless days, weeks, months . . . He

immediately walked away from the chair, then he went back; he wanted to try to sit in it, and he did. Opposite, one saw only the wall, and, above, the sky, nothing more. He tried to imagine a match taking place behind that wall, Secerni's attacks, Saniosi's feints, Piva's fouls, Fognin's drives. He saw the sweaty faces, the dust clouds, the scraped and scabbed knees, he saw the arguments over offsides and the rock-paper-scissors to decide the teams, he saw the rage and he saw the joy. And he saw a ball spring up from the top of the wall like a black moon from the sea, saw it rise, tracing its arc in the sky, and falling to earth on this side, bouncing a few metres from the chair, then stopping meekly in the dust. Hello, ball, he said, tenderly contemplating it in the light of the dawn.

When he reached the top of the wall, he realized that Sieroni had fallen asleep on the ground, right there below him; he woke him by dropping a shoe on his back. He then pulled up the ladder and climbed back down into the schoolyard. At the first occasion they had to talk about it, his throng of classmates made only a collective impression upon him while—unable to bring any one face or name into focus, surrounded by their disappointed eyes—he told of locked doors and darkness.

It rained the following days, and the schoolyard remained deserted. That Sunday, their Instructress told Bragonzi that there was a surprise in store for him, his dad had come from Milan to see him, he was to run and get dressed, chop-chop! His dad took him to a restaurant and then to the movies to see a Lemmy Caution film, after which they strolled around the port looking at the ships. Toward evening they got in a taxi, but instead of giving the school's address his father said, "To the train station." Bragonzi didn't ask any questions, and he kept silent even in the baggage room, where his father reclaimed a big black bag. They returned to the school in another taxi, and only when they were in front of the gate, with the taxi-driver waiting to head back to the station, did his father crouch down and open it. The first thing to emerge was an issue of *Soldino*, but already Bragonzi had started to tremble; then came a stick of modelling clay and a little puzzle, and meanwhile the rustling of cellophane could be heard underneath; then there was a balsa-wood model-airplane kit; and then, finally, that transparent bag, which his father gave to him after making him wait longer than for the other presents, as he smiled back in silence and hoped that his tremors weren't visible.

"Thank you," he said, and he wanted to add something else, but while he was thinking about what this should be his dad had already got back in the taxi. And so Bragonzi hid everything under his raincoat and ran to the dormitory. It was past the hour when boys needed to come back from any outings "already fed," for the rules barred these temporary escapees from joining the others in the refectory during meals (his father didn't know this, since Bragonzi had never been brave enough to tell him), and so there was no one around. After putting the other presents in his closet, Bragonzi sat on the bed with the see-through bag on his knees. It was closed with a thin red drawstring and, in addition to the ball, contained the pump and the needle for inflating it, as well as a little box of wax and a small felt cloth with zigzag edges for polishing: once opened, the bag released a delightful leathery aroma, which reminded Bragonzi of the smell of his nicest pair of shoes. The pump was icy cold, the ball less so. He stuck the needle into its valve and began to inflate it with care: some of the air in this room, he thought, is going to end up inside there, and it will never come out again. When every last pentagon had popped out convexly, he removed the needle. He spread his thighs slightly apart to better hold the ball, not wanting it to touch the floor. It was magnificent, a Derbystar "Deliciae Platearum," even more beautiful than Best's "World Cup" ball; he couldn't imagine how hard his father must have had to look before finding it, or how much he had paid for it, its white just slightly pearlier than the rest, with iridescent reflections, and black pentagons framed by a subtle red outline, and a little yellow star right underneath its brand name, a ball even Rivera would kick cautiously, truly like nothing he had ever seen before . . . He fondled it awhile with his fingertips and slid it against his cheeks to take in its smoothness, decided to give it a few more pumps, then went back to caressing it. He looked at the clock: before long, the other boys would all be coming back upstairs, he had to be quick. He put the pump and the bag in the closet, and went down to the atrium with the "Deliciae Platearum" under his arm. From there, he passed through the television lounge before skirting the refectory, crouching down beneath the windows so as not to be spotted by the diners; at the end of the hallway, the door to the schoolyard was open—the Instructresses liked to take a stroll right after dinnertime.



It was not yet completely dark in the schoolyard, and from the sky, now that the rain had stopped and the clouds had been torn asunder, Bragonzi could tell that the next day would be a beautiful one. He avoided the puddles as he moved to the center of the soccer field, which was marked with faded white paint. He looked at the ball in his hands, even more beautiful in the moonlight. He checked that the top of his right shoe wasn't muddy, looked at the wall in front of him and then above the wall, too, took a deep breath, looked once more at the ball, threw it into the air, waited for it to come back down, and kicked it with his instep when it was roughly thirty centimetres from the ground, and he knew from the sound it made that he had kicked it well, saw it rise quickly into the air, first darkly silhouetted against a cloud whitened by the moonlight, then brightly against the night sky, and it seemed to rest there, suspended in midair, until it descended, and disappeared behind the black horizon of the wall.

Now he could go back, and bury himself in his bed. ♦

(Translated, from the Italian, by Brian Robert Moore.)

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Michele Mari on the anguish of childhood.

THE CRITICS

BOOKS

SUCCESSION

Dynasty as the engine of human history.

BY MAYA JASANOFF

Everything has a history, and writers have for thousands of years tried to pull together a universal history of everything. "In earliest times," the Hellenistic historian Polybius mused, in the second century B.C., "history was a series of unrelated episodes, but from now on history becomes an organic whole. Europe and Africa with Asia, and Asia with Africa and Europe." For the past hundred years or so, each generation of English-language readers has been treated to a fresh blockbuster trying to synthesize world history. H. G. Wells's "The Outline of History" (1920), written "to be read as much by Hindus or Moslems or Buddhists as by Americans and Western Europeans," argued "that men form one universal brotherhood . . . that their individual lives, their nations and races, interbreed and blend and go on to merge again at last in one common human destiny." Then came Arnold Toynbee, whose twelve-volume "Study of History" (1934-61), abridged into a best-selling two, proposed that human civilizations rose and fell in predictable stages. In time, Jared Diamond swept in with "Guns, Germs, and Steel" (1997), delivering an agriculture- and animal-powered explanation for the phases of human development. More recently, the field has belonged to Yuval Noah Harari, whose "Sapiens" (2011) describes the ascent of humankind over other species, and offers Silicon Valley-friendly speculations about a post-human future.

The appeal of such chronicles has something to do with the way they schematize history in the service of a master plot, identifying laws or tendencies that explain the course of human events. Western historians have long charted history as the linear, progressive working out of some larger design—courtesy of God, Nature, or Marx. Other historians, most influentially the fourteenth-century scholar Ibn Khaldun, embraced a sine-wave model of civilizational growth and decline. The cliché that "history repeats itself" promotes a cyclical version of events, reminiscent of the Hindu cosmology that divided time into four ages, each more degenerate than the last.

What if world history more resembles a family tree, its vectors hard to trace through cascading tiers, multiplying branches, and an ever-expanding jumble of names? This is the model, heavier on masters than on plot, suggested by Simon Sebag Montefiore's "The World: A Family History of Humanity" (Knopf), a new synthesis that, as the title suggests, approaches the sweep of world history through the family—or, to be more precise, through families in power. In the course of some thirteen hundred pages, "The World" offers a monumental survey of dynastic rule: how to get it, how to keep it, how to squander it.

"The word family has an air of cosiness and affection, but of course in real life families can be webs of struggle and cruelty too," Montefiore begins. Dynastic history, as he tells it, was riddled with rivalry, betrayal, and violence from the start. A prime example might be Julius Caesar's adopted son Octavian, the founder of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, who consolidated his rule by entrapping and murdering Caesar's biological son Caesarion, the last of the Ptolemies. Octavian's ruthlessness looked anodyne compared with many other ancient successions, like that of the Achaemenid king Artaxerxes II, who was opposed by his mother and her favorite son. When the favorite died in battle against Artaxerxes, Montefiore reports, their mother executed one of his killers by scaphism, "in which the victim was enclosed between two boats while force-fed honey and milk until maggots, rats and flies infested their living faecal cocoon, eating them alive." She also ordered the family of Artaxerxes' wife to be buried alive, and murdered her daughter-in-law by feeding her poisoned fowl.

As such episodes suggest, it was one thing to hold power, another to pass it on peacefully. "Succession is the great test of a system; few manage it well," Montefiore observes. Two distinct models coalesced in the thirteenth century. One was practiced by the Mongol empire and its successor states, which tended to hand power to whichever of a ruler's sons proved the most able in warfare, politics, or internecine family feuds. The Mongol conquests were accompanied by rampant sexual violence; DNA evidence suggests that Genghis Khan may be "literally the father of Asia," Montefiore writes. He insists, though, that "women among nomadic peoples enjoyed more freedom and authority than those in sedentary states," and that the many wives, consorts, and concubines in a royal court could occasionally hold real power. The Tang-dynasty empress Wu worked her way up from concubine of the sixth rank through the roles of empress consort (wife), dowager (widow), and regent (mother), and finally became an empress in her own right. More than a millennium

ABOVE: ANTONIO GIOVANNI PINNA



Over centuries, lines of descent—with all their rules and rivalries—have remained perilous, prescriptive, and powerful.

ILLUSTRATION BY SOPHY HOLLINGTON

later, another low-ranking concubine who became de-facto ruler, Empress Dowager Cixi, contrasted herself with her peer Queen Victoria: "I don't think her life was half so interesting and eventful as mine. . . . She had nothing to say about policy. Now look at me. I have 400 million dependent on my judgment."

The political liability of these heir-splitting methods was that rival claimants might fracture the kingdom. The Ottomans handled this problem by dispatching a brigade of mute executioners, known as the Tongueless, to strangle a sultan's male relatives, and so limit the shedding of royal blood. This made for intense power games in the harem, as mothers tussled to place their sons at the front of the line for succession. A sultan was supposed to stop visiting a consort once she'd given birth to a son, Montefiore explains, "so that each prince would be supported by one mother." Suleiman the Magnificent—whose father cleared the way for him by having three brothers, seven nephews, and many of his own sons strangled—broke that rule with a young Ukrainian captive named Hürrem (also known as Roxelana). Suleiman had more than one son with Hürrem, freed her, and married her; he then had his eldest son by another mother strangled. But that left two of his and Hürrem's surviving adult sons jockeying for the top position. After a failed bid to seize power, the younger escaped to Persia, where he was hunted down by the Tongueless and throttled.

A different model for dynasty-building relied on the apparently more tranquil method of intermarriage. Alexander the Great was an early adopter of exogamy as an accessory to conquest; Montefiore says that he merged "the elites of his new empire, Macedonians and Persians, in a mass multicultural wedding" at Susa in 324 B.C. Many other empire-builders through the centuries took up the tactic, notably the Mughal emperor Akbar, who followed his subjugation of the Rajputs by marrying a princess of Amber, and so, Montefiore notes, kicked off "a fusion of Tamerlanian and Rajput lineages with Sanskritic and Persian cultures" that transformed the arts of north India. But it was in Catholic Europe, with its insistence on monogamy and primogeniture, that royal matchmaking became an essential tool of dynasty-building. (The Catholic Church itself, which imposed celibacy on its own Fathers, Mothers, Brothers, and Sisters, kept power in the family when Popes positioned their nephews—*nipote*, in Italian—in positions of authority, a practice that, as Montefiore points out, gave us the term "nepotism.")

The archetypal dynasty of this model was the Habsburgs. The family had been catapulted to prominence in the thirteenth century by the self-styled Count Rudolf, who presented himself as a godson of the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II. Rudolf, recognizing the strategic value of family alliances, cannily married off five of his daughters to German princes, thus helping to cement his position as king of the Germans. His method was violently echoed by the Habsburg-sponsored conquistadores, who, in order to shore up their authority, forced the kinswomen of Motecuhzoma and Atahualpa into marriages. And it was to the Habsburgs that Napoleon Bonaparte turned when he sought a mother for his own hoped-for heir.

The ruthless biology of primogeniture tended to reduce women to the position of breeders—and occasionally men, too. Otto von Bismarck snidely called Saxe-Coburg, the home of Queen Victoria's husband, Albert, the "stud farm of Europe." This system conduced to inbreeding, and came at a genetic price. By the sixteenth century, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V suffered from a massively protruding jaw, with a mouth agape and a stubby tongue slurring his speech. His son Philip II contended with a congenitally incapable heir, Don Carlos, who, Montefiore summarizes, abused animals, flagellated servant girls, defenestrated a page, and torched a house; he also tried to murder a number of courtiers, stage a coup in the Netherlands, stab his uncle, assassinate his father, and kill himself "by swallowing a diamond." The Spanish Habsburg line ended a few generations later with "Carlos the Hexed," whose parents were uncle and niece; he was, in Montefiore's description, "born with a brain swelling, one kidney, one testicle and a jaw so deformed he could barely chew yet a throat so wide he could swallow chunks of meat," along with "ambiguous genitalia" that may have contributed to his inability to sire an heir.

By the nineteenth century, European dynasts formed an incestuous thicket of cousins, virtually all of them descended from Charlemagne, and many, more proximately, from Queen Victoria. The First World War was the family feud to end them all. Triggered by the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, the heir of the Habsburg emperor Franz Josef, the war brought three first cousins into conflict: Kaiser Wilhelm II, Tsar Nicholas II, and King George V. (By then, Franz Josef's only son had killed himself; his wife—and first cousin—had been stabbed to death; his brother Emperor Maximilian of Mexico had been executed; and another first cousin, Emperor Pedro II of Brazil, had been deposed.) The war would, Montefiore observes, ultimately "destroy the dynasties it was designed to save": the Habsburgs, the Ottomans, the



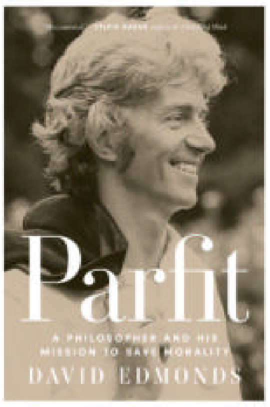
Romanovs, and the Hohenzollerns had all been ousted by 1922.

With the rise to political power of non-royal families in the twentieth century, Montefiore's template for dynastic rule switches from monarchs to mafiosi. The Mafia model applies as readily to the Kennedys, whom Montefiore calls "a macho family business" with Mob ties, as to the Yeltsins, Boris and his daughter Tatiana, whose designated *famiglia* of oligarchs selected Vladimir Putin as their heir. In Montefiore's view, Donald Trump is a wannabe dynast who installed a "disorganized, corrupt and nepotistic court" in democracy's most iconic palace.

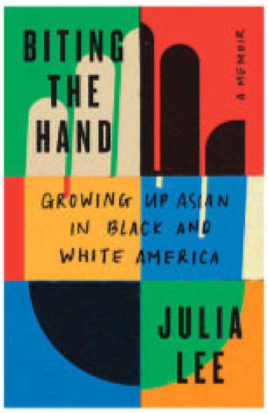
The Mafia metaphor also captures an important truth: a history of family power is a history of hit jobs, lately including Mohammed bin Salman's ordering the dismemberment of Jamal Khashoggi—which has been linked to battles within the House of Saud—and Kim Jong Un's arranging the murder of his half brother. In the late eighteenth century, the concept of family was taking on another role. Modern republican governments seized on the language of kinship—the Jacobins' "*fraternité*," the United States' "Founding Fathers"—to forge political communities detached from specific dynasties. Versions of the title "Father of the Nation" have been bestowed on leaders from Argentina's José de San Martín to Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda. Immanuel Kant, among others, believed that democracies would be more peaceful than monarchies, because they would be free from dynastic struggles. But some of the bloodiest conflicts of modern times have instead hinged on who does and doesn't belong to which national "family." Mustafa Kemal renamed himself "Father of the Turks" (Atatürk) in the wake of the Armenian genocide. A century later, Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of Myanmar's "Father of the Nation," refused to condemn the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya, who have been denied citizenship and so excluded from counting as Burmese.

It was partly to counter the genocidal implications of nationalism that, in 1955, MOMA's photography curator Edward Steichen launched "The Family of Man," a major exhibition designed to showcase "the essential oneness of mankind throughout the world." The trouble is that even the most intimately connected human family can divide

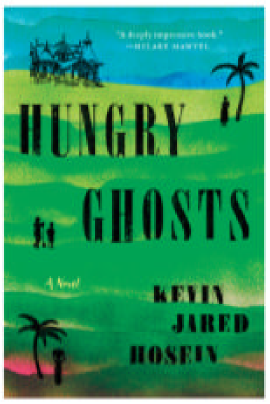
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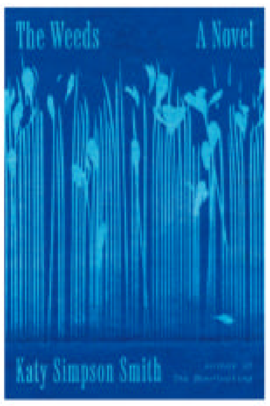
Parfit, *by David Edmonds (Princeton).* Widely regarded as one of the most important philosophers of the past century, Derek Parfit was born to a British missionary family in China, and spent most of his life at an Oxford college whose fellows have no teaching responsibilities to distract them from research. Parfit made contributions to questions about identity, future generations, and freedom, but his central project was to argue for the objective nature of morality. Edmonds's companionable biography tracks this work while assembling a portrait of how Parfit grew from a young boy with strong moral intuitions to a kind, perfectionistic man who believed that the stakes of his mission were so high that he should devote almost all of his waking hours to it.



Biting the Hand, *by Julia Lee (Holt).* In this affecting memoir, a literature professor whose parents emigrated from South Korea writes about her "inheritance" of what Koreans call *han*—a culturally specific mixture of rage and shame—as well as the insidious tendency of "racial shame" to separate "people of color from one another." Lee mixes personal anecdotes, including experiences of racism, with analyses of racially charged historical events, such as the 1992 Los Angeles riots, during which "thousands of Korean-owned businesses were looted and torched." She argues that white supremacy has been bolstered by a "culture of scarcity," in which "there's only a certain amount of bandwidth available in the American consciousness to deal with racial oppression." Changing this will involve rejecting an entire "racial imaginary" that makes room only for the broad categories of white and nonwhite people.



Hungry Ghosts, *by Kevin Jared Hosein (Ecco).* In this novel, set in rural Trinidad in the nineteen-forties, the disappearance of a wealthy farmer upends carefully tended boundaries of class and identity. The farmer's wife orders one of his employees, part of a community of indigent laborers on the village outskirts, to take over his duties. This man has always taught his family to be content with the status quo, even though he chafes at the limitations of his own life. But, as those with power make a game of his desire for a more expansive life—for sensual pleasure and land of his own—he finds himself increasingly at risk of forgetting what he has told his son about moths drawn to lamplight: "It is that hope that turns on them and gets them killed."



The Weeds, *by Katy Simpson Smith (Farrar, Straus & Giroux).* Two women, living centuries apart, scour the Colosseum for plant samples in this lyrical, incisive novel. In 1854, one helps the botanist Richard Deakin (a historical figure) catalogue the amphitheatre's flora; in 2018, the other assists an academic tracking the changes in its ecosystem since Deakin's time. The twin narratives mimic field-work notebooks, with headings by family (Vitaceae, Gentianeae, Ambrosiaceae) and vivid illustrations. Gradually, the women's fragmentary entries come to reveal a changing climate, the invisibility of women's work, and the perseverance of unofficial histories. As Simpson Smith writes, "the weeds outlive the narrative."

against itself. In the final days of the Soviet Union, Montefiore recounts, the U.S. Secretary of State James Baker discussed the possibility of war in Ukraine with a member of the Politburo. The Soviet official observed that Ukraine had twelve million Russians and many were in mixed marriages, "so what kind of war would that be?" Baker told him, "A normal war."

"The World" has the heft and character of a dictionary; it's divided into twenty-three "acts," each labelled by world-population figures and subdivided into sections headed by family names. Montefiore energetically fulfills his promise to write a "genuine world history, not unbalanced by excessive focus on Britain and Europe." In zesty sentences and lively vignettes, he captures the widening global circuits of people, commerce, and culture. Here's the Roman emperor Claudius parading down the streets of what is now Colchester on an elephant; there's Manikongo Garcia holding court in what is today Angola "amid Flemish tapestries, wearing Indian linens, eating with cutlery of American silver." Here are the Anglo-Saxon Mercian kings using Arabic dirhams as local currency; there's the Khmer ruler Jayavarman VII converting the Hindu site of Angkor for Buddhist worship.

It's largely up to the reader, though, to make meaning out of these portraits, especially when it comes to the conceit at the book's center. For one thing, a "family history" is not the same as a "history of the family," of the sort pioneered by social historians such as Philippe Ariès, Louise A. Tilly, and Lawrence Stone. Montefiore alludes only in passing to shifts such as the consolidation of the nuclear family in Europe after the Black Death, and to the effects on the family of the Industrial Revolution and modern contraception. He offers no sustained analysis of the implications that different family structures had for who could hold power and why.

To the extent that "The World" does have a plot, it concerns the resilience of dynastic power in the face of political transformation. Even today, more than forty nations have a monarch as the head of state, fifteen of them in the British Commonwealth. Yet in democracies, too, holding political power is very often a matter of family connections. "Well, Franklin, there's nothing like keeping the name in the family," Teddy Roosevelt remarked at the marriage of his niece Eleanor to her cousin. Americans balk at how many U.S. Presidential nominees in the past generation have been family members of former senators (George H. W. Bush, Al Gore), governors (Mitt Romney), and Presidents (George W. Bush, Hillary Clinton). That's nothing compared with postwar Japan, where virtually every Prime Minister has come from a political family and some thirty per cent of parliamentary representatives are second generation. In Asia more generally, the path to power for women, especially, has often run through male relatives: of the eleven women who have led Asian democracies, nine have been the daughter, sister, or widow of a male leader. This isn't how democracy was supposed to work.

Why is hereditary power so hard to shake? Montefiore argues that "dynastic reversion seems both natural and pragmatic when weak states are not trusted to deliver justice or protection and loyalties remain to kin not to institutions"—and new states, many of them hobbled by colonial rule, are rarely strong states. Then, people in power can bend the rules in ways that help them and their successors keep it. It's not just monarchies that go autocratic: republics can get there all on their own.

A fuller answer, though, rests on the material reality of inheritance, which has systematically enriched some families and dispossessed others. This is most starkly illustrated by the history of slavery, which, as Montefiore frequently points out, has always been twinned with the history of family. Transatlantic slavery, in particular, was "an anti-familial institution" that captured families and ripped them apart, while creating conditions of sexual bondage that produced furtive parallel families. Sally Hemings was the daughter of her first owner, John Wayles; the half sister of her next owner, Martha Wayles; and the mistress of another, Martha's husband, Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson's children by Wayles and Hemings were simultaneously half siblings and cousins—one set enslaved, the other free. Even without such intimate ties, European family privilege was magnified in the distorting mirror of American slavery. In Guyana in 1823, for example, an enslaved man and his son Jack Gladstone led a rebellion against their British owner, John Gladstone. Jack Gladstone, for his role in the uprising, was exiled to St. Lucia. John Gladstone, for his ownership of more than two thousand enslaved workers, received the largest payout that the British government made to a slaveholder when slavery was abolished. John's son William Gladstone, the future Liberal Prime Minister, gave his maiden speech in Parliament defending John's treatment of his chattel labor.

The inheritance of money and status goes a long way toward explaining the prevalence of dynastic patterns in other sectors. Thomas Paine maintained that "a hereditary monarch is as absurd a position as a hereditary doctor," and yet in many societies being a doctor often was hereditary. The same went for artists, bankers, soldiers, and more; the Paris executioner who lopped off Louis XVI's head was preceded in his line of work by three generations of family members. Montefiore's own family, Britain's most prominent Sephardic dynasty, puts in the occasional appearance in these pages, alongside the Rothschilds (with whom the Montefiores intermarried); both were banking families, and their prominence endures in part because of the generational accumulation of wealth. A recent study of occupations in the United States shows that children are disproportionately likely to do the same job as one of their parents. The children of doctors are twenty times as likely as others to go into medicine; the children of textile-machine operators are hundreds of times more likely to operate textile machines. Children of academics—like me—are five times as likely to go into academia as others. It's nepo babies all the way down.

There's an obvious tension between the ideal of democracy, in which citizens enjoy equal standing regardless of family status, and the reality that the family persists as a prime mediator of social, cultural, and financial opportunities. That doesn't mean that democracy is bound to be dynastic, any more than it means that families have to be superseded by the state. It does mean that dynasties play as persistent and paradoxical a role in many democracies as families do for many citizens of those democracies—can't live with them, can't live without them. ♦

BOOKS

THE MOZART EFFECT

The composer in his time, and ours.

BY JAMES WOOD



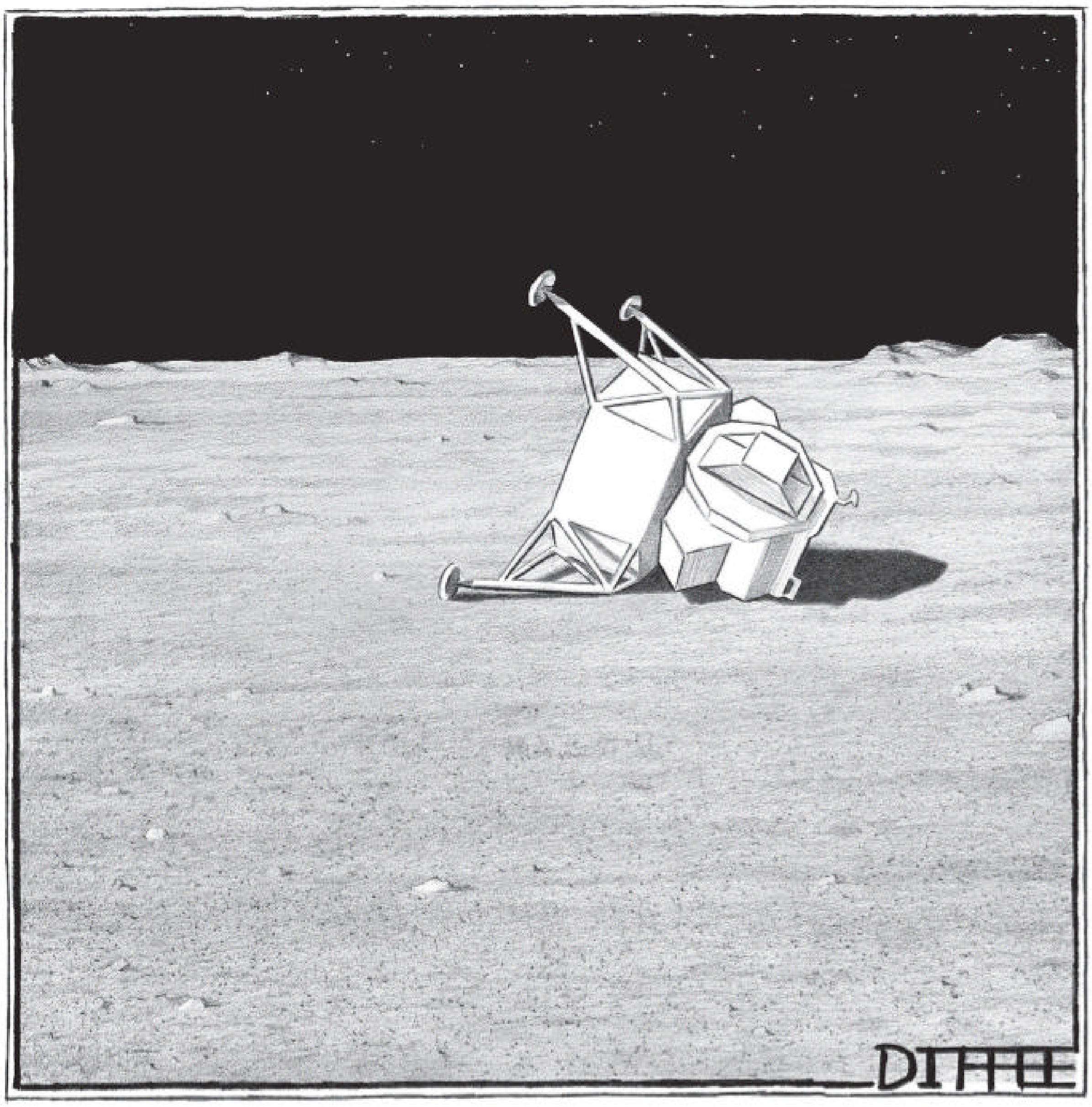
Music has its seasons, and people have their needs. At some point in the autumn of 1979, I became obsessed with a few bars of Mozart. I was thirteen, fundamentally cheerful but convinced I was fundamentally melancholy, and ravenous for all the music I could get my hands on, especially music that made me tearful. My father, a man who in later life would think nothing of driving forty miles on his own to hear Bach or Beethoven, had recently seen the English pianist Clifford Curzon in concert, playing Mozart's last piano concerto, No. 27 (K. 595). I didn't know the piece, but I knew about Curzon. My father collected pianists and their performances. Curzon had studied with Artur Schnabel and Wanda Landowska, and, above all, Curzon was English, and in those days you could feel almost patriotic about famous English musicians.

We had an LP of the concerto (I don't recall the pianist, but it wasn't Curzon, an intensely self-critical performer who didn't release a version in his lifetime), and I started listening to it. I discounted the first movement, with its gracious and sprightly tunes, the piano scampering around the orchestral parts with the usual firm joy of Mozart—far too happy for me. The third movement was a dance, a 6/8 romp. But the slow movement, the Larghetto, that was what I needed. The piano opens the movement on its own, a four-bar melody of mournful beauty. It sounds stark, exposed, almost tentative. Insistent, too, because we will hear it ten times in this short movement. Thirty or so bars in, the piano finishes this first tune, and the orchestra bursts into a loud tutti. For a moment, the sound is a little boilerplate—a stately cadence unfolds, violins trilling as the basses make their moves up through A-flat and B-flat on their way back to the tonic of E-flat. It's pretty and restrained, reminiscent of Handel. But *then!* Mozart, ruler of repetition, brings back the cadence, now with the second violins doing a gorgeous arpeggiated run underneath; and then he brings it back a third time, enriched now by surging mixtures of woodwind and horns. Suddenly, what had seemed formulaic is beautiful almost beyond bearing. But he isn't quite done. A few minutes later, toward the end of the movement, Mozart returns to the same sequence, this time giving the arpeggiated run to the pianist, surely aware that this twining filigree was the real beauty, holding together all the other assembled beauties.

I dropped the stylus onto the same grooves again and again, and the passage was shimmeringly installed in my mind, to play at will. It fed my sentimental adolescent needs. (It would be embarrassing to mention which pop songs of that era performed a similar function, although, of all composers, Mozart, the machinist of popular arias, would likely be the most forgiving.) It's a moving sequence, and I'm still unable to hear that crush of notes without emotion. But I am struck now by what I chose not to hear. *Is* the Larghetto mournful, really? Or does it enact something more paradoxical than that—a kind of proud dismay? That passage still provokes my tears, but they are not of grief so much as of gratitude, tears while smiling. Perhaps, then, it is the perfection of this beauty that moves me, with no specific emotion expressed by the notes themselves? The music surges romantically in a falling cascade but is actually stepping with deliberation toward the tidy inevitability of its so-called perfect cadence. To that cadence, the most formulaic of all in classical music, Mozart was almost fanatically drawn, and particularly to the rising journey of his basses up to the tonic;

Patrick Mackie's "Mozart in Motion" deftly reframes familiar pieces.

ILLUSTRATION BY PIERRE BUTTIN



"Houston, we have a drinking problem."

• •

again and again in his work, he finds different ways to ornament the rightness of this homecoming. Yet, if he loves coming back, how he also loves to wander away! I hadn't bothered with the first movement of this concerto, but it unfolds a wild and complex development section—that region where the music seems to be going for a bit of a tonal stroll—as he experimentally cycles through different keys, speedily trying them on and discarding them like the acquisitive dandy he was, at the average rate of about one key every two bars.

Beethoven and Mozart are the composers most mansioned in myth; contemporary scholarship has worked hard to blow these palaces down without evicting the presiding geniuses. No, there's no real evidence that Salieri was jealous of Mozart (in this period, Salieri was a successful and established composer), or that Salieri poisoned his brilliant competitor (in different eras, the Freemasons and the Jews were also blamed for Mozart's untimely death). Yes, Mozart could be childish, and he loved the scatological—his letters are outrageous—but he was not the "eternal child" of Romantic construction or of the movie "Amadeus," the fizzing prodigy of heedless all-nighters and instant overtures. He had money worries and mysterious debts, but there was nothing especially painful or ominous about 1791, the last year of his life. It was lucrative and busier than ever: into this period he packed the unfinished Requiem, two operas ("The Magic Flute," "La Clemenza di Tito"), the Clarinet Concerto, and of course the Piano Concerto No. 27, which used to be moistly admired for its "quality of farewell" but which, in fact, seems tender and resolute.

Doubtless, Mozart's sheer prodigiousness will always invite us to do what Kierkegaard called playing "the game of marveling at world-history." He is a marvel. He was already a marvel at the age of six, when, in September, 1762, he left his native city, Salzburg, for Vienna, accompanied by his father, Leopold, and his musically talented older sister, Nannerl. He would be paraded as a divine freak of nature, a kind of reverse Kaspar Hauser, tested and examined wherever he performed. In Vienna, before the Empress Maria Theresa, he played virtuosically even when a cloth was thrown over the keyboard. When, the next year, he set out for Paris with his father, he began a travelling tour that lasted for the next three and a half years. In London, where he stayed more than a year, a lawyer and amateur scientist named Daines Barrington asked the eight-year-old to sight-read some music, and then challenged him to compose two different pieces, a song of love and a song of rage. Barrington presented his findings to the Royal Society: genius certified. The boy wrote his first symphony at eight, his first opera at twelve. Twenty years later, in 1788, he wrote his last three symphonies, Nos. 39, 40, and 41, in a single summer. Fifteen piano concertos were dashed off between 1782 and 1786. His surviving manuscripts are, for the most part, remarkably clean.

Modern commentary, rightly complicating the narrative of easy and childlike genius, often emphasizes the "trade" aspect of composition and performance in Mozart's day: the wrangling, the compromising, the jobbing. "Mozart in Motion" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), by the English poet Patrick Mackie, offers an exemplary intervention in this kind of cultural critique. Mozart lived at a time when composers tended to write a great deal, very fast. Like modern songwriters, they relied on conventional hooks and patterns. Aria writers like Mozart regularly collaborated with their singers; and, like modern entertainers, they were happy to leave music open to the controlled hazard of onstage improvisation. (When Mozart, the greatest master of keyboard improvisation before Beethoven, performed the premières of his own piano concertos, which was most of the time, he might leave the piano part blank, or provide only a suggestive bass pattern.) In an age when there was often little time for even a single run-through, orchestral players

had to be excellent sight readers. The modern concert, with its religious silence and attention, did not yet exist; audience members came and went, chatted and flirted, ate and played cards, noisily demanded and received encores. In Mozart's day, Vienna had no dedicated concert hall. The composer was simultaneously his own performer, conductor, band manager, agent.

And yet our understanding of these conditions makes the mysteries only more acute. How was this quantity of unworldly and imperishable music achieved in such conditions? The endlessly prolific pinnacles seem all the more astonishing, all the more unreachable, in our era of padded fellowships. George Steiner used to be aghast that we now possess the cheap freedom to listen to a difficult late Beethoven string quartet while eating our breakfast. Surely the miracle is that composers like Bach and Mozart might have *written* such work while eating their breakfast. There's plenty more where this came from, they seem to be saying, in their every bar.

Mackie's book nicely balances the proper spiritual astonishment with the proper cultural curiosity, as he goes about chronicling Mozart's life through a series of celebrated works—among them the Sinfonia Concertante, the Fantasia in C Minor, the last three symphonies, and, above all, "The Marriage of Figaro" and "Don Giovanni." Essentially, he describes a Mozart of contradiction and doubleness, a composer who was eager to please his audiences and who, at the same time, pushed his work into experiment and risk—a kind of spy in the corridors of the Enlightenment. For Mackie, there's something marvellously unstable in his music, in its "gift for prophesying the future even while it was pleasing the present." His music superbly repackaged the era's most virtuous self-descriptions—clarity, symmetry, wit, light—only to add an unstoppable surplus: a torrential refinement, a remarkable inwardness. This conception of Mozart may sound a little abstract and overweening, and at times it can be; I wasn't always convinced by Mackie's claims, or always able to hear exactly what he describes. It's one thing to assert, for instance, that Mozart's piano concertos and symphonies "can reveal themselves as brilliantly flexible narratives of errancy and homecoming"; it's another to go on to insist that they "can amount indeed to existential allegories of the fates of psyches and societies pitched into change." The first insight comes from a critic who is reading music as narrative; the second from a critic who is reading music as cultural allegory.

But at his best Mackie is a sensitive and highly intelligent appraiser of musical form, with a gift for analyzing Mozart's music as the dynamic enactment—rather than the simple expression—of larger cultural and biographical energies. Take his stirring account of Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 8 in A Minor (K. 310). In September, 1777, Mozart and his mother left Salzburg for Paris. For the young composer, now twenty-one, the expedition was another installment in his tortuous lifelong quest for commissions and regular employment. He had been working since the age of seventeen as a court musician, a favored functionary, in Salzburg; he disliked his employer, the enlightened but haughty Archbishop Colloredo. So Paris beckoned—salons, lucrative connections, a worldly, almost overdeveloped musical scene, and the last fumes of Diderot and Rousseau. Here he planned to make his mark as composer and performer, spinning riches from dazzled auditors. In fact, the trip was a terrible failure. Mozart was a poor self-promoter, quickly soured on his hosts, and complained about the smugness and musical indifference of Parisian society. Far worse, his mother died in the city in July, 1778, and Mozart had to write to his father in Salzburg with the shocking news. (The manipulative Leopold characteristically blamed his son for her death.)

But out of this abjection came one of Mozart's most ravishing and radical piano works, the Sonata in A Minor, a piece that looks back to Bach (to my ears, the slow movement sounds at times like one of Bach's more inquisitive chorale preludes, sometimes close to the richly ornamented BWV 641) and forward to Beethoven and even to Brahms (the amazing last movement spins away into unaccountable realms). People profess to hear Mozart's filial grief in the dissonance and stark solitude of the sonata's slow movement; some pianists

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play it swooningly slowly, though Dinu Lipatti, in the fabled last recital of his life, went through it briskly, with an even-tempered levity that seems closer to the spirit of the piece. Mackie avoids the easy biographical inference, and instead situates the sonata in the context of Mozart's fraught relations with his patrons and auditors. He starts by picturing the provincial wunderkind in the great French metropolis. Was he a "masterful virtuoso on tour," or just "a young man in need of a job"? A savant or a servant? He tells us about when Mozart was asked to play in grand rooms on the Faubourg Saint-Germain, where the Duchesse de Chabot and her friends treated him like the help, and continued with their drawing class.

This sonata, Mackie argues, is Mozart's sly revenge both on his wealthy audience and on the need to court such people. It doesn't officially break away from the aural world of the salon, but "no one could ever really mistake it for background music." He writes well about the speedy harmonic ideas of the quick first movement, the stark but sweet inwardness of the slow movement ("the notes create space around themselves"), and the way that the final presto slides away "from anything that its audience can have expected," dancing in a kind of tranced *perpetuum mobile* until the whole piece comes to an abrupt halt, as if the irritated composer were stubbornly working on the clock, and had simply timed out. Mackie claims that the music is uncertain about whom it wants as an audience; he calls the piece a "bitter hymn to the inevitability of artistic solitude."

I thought these claims a bit far-fetched at first, maybe just a more academic way of smuggling romantic biographical inference back into the music—not the grieving Mozart, now, but the struggling one. That suspicion wasn't helped by Mackie's tendency to overreach: by the end of the chapter, the A-Minor Sonata is being lauded for an almost Hegelian ability "to suggest a version of modern culture capable of declaring its bleakest losses and uncertainties even while it maintains the most radiant surfaces." But, casting around on YouTube for live performances of this piece, I came across an unwitting enactment of Mackie's argument. In the center of a huge, empty, high-ceilinged room of the kind Mozart must have played in, with a massive glittering chandelier asserting itself over the piano, Daniel Barenboim sits, dressed in a tailcoat and gray foulard as if auditioning for "Amadeus." He plays the A-Minor Sonata finely, of course. But now, thanks to Mackie, I could picture Mozart wreaking his revenge in Paris. Barenboim's isolation at the piano represents our culture's hushed devotion to the sacrality of the solo recital. But, when Mozart sat at the keyboard in a Paris salon, was anyone actually listening, and what did people comprehend, anyway? And might Mozart, in the midst of a busy room, not have felt more solitary than Barenboim in the midst of an empty one?

Mozart was highly attuned to this dilemma. In an often-cited letter to his father, he wrote that his piano concertos offered a happy medium between the easy and the difficult. There are passages, he said, that only the connoisseur can fully appreciate, "yet the common listener will find them satisfying as well, although without knowing why." Mackie's reframing of pieces you thought you knew quite well has the effect of allowing us to see both sides of this musical pact; meanwhile, his dialectical anxiety usefully worries away at Mozart's smooth formulation. The practiced pleaser was sure of his ability to hold together the charming and the challenging, and that confident coherence is what most of us still hear today. But the cultural critic is interested in how each category infects the other, and in whether Mozart's pieces, despite their polish and swagger, encode a secret instability.

Mackie points us toward little surges or assertions of will and ambition that we might have missed in impeccably achieved pieces. I like how he writes about the novelty of the opening bars of the "Jenamy" Concerto (K. 271), which is often considered Mozart's first great piano concerto. (He wrote it in Salzburg, in 1777, not very long before he left for Paris.) The orchestra isn't allowed to do the usual warmup introduction. Instead, it announces a very brief welcome, and then the piano impertinently pushes its way in, "as if music itself suddenly cannot wait to show what it can become." About the Great Mass in C Minor (K. 427), Mackie suggests that the operatic gorgeousness of the soprano solo in the "Et incarnatus est" section (probably performed by Mozart's wife, the singer Constanze Weber) threatens to explode, in a Neapolitan secular burst, the proprieties of so-called sacred music.



"You be the moral grandstander and I'll be the politically incorrect troll."

Opera is where Mackie is at his most eloquent, partly because Mozart's operas are such hospitable cultural artifacts: they flagrantly wobble between pleasing the audience and challenging

it, between disruption and the satisfactions of closure. Consider only the librettos, both by the Italian writer Lorenzo Da Ponte, of "The Marriage of Figaro" (1786) and "Don Giovanni" (1787). In the first, set on a carnivalesque "day of madness," traditional hierarchies are upended when Figaro and Susanna, affianced servants in the household of Count Almaviva, defend themselves against the erotic and aristocratic entitlements of the Count, and triumphantly insist on the validity of their love union. In the second, Don Giovanni, an unstoppably licentious nobleman, rapes, kills, and seduces his way through society like some demonic negative of Don Quixote, complete with his version of loyal Sancho Panza, a rather less loyal sidekick named Leporello. When Giovanni refuses to repent to the ghost of the man he killed near the start of the opera, he is consumed by fire and transported to Hell.

The two works, written in consecutive years, seem to need each other as meat loves salt: sunny D major versus stormy D minor; gentle eros versus menacing eros; forgiveness versus punishment. But both operas unleash disorderly energies that they must struggle to contain. "Figaro" ends like Shakespearean comedy, with marriages benignly dispensed and confirmed. "Don Giovanni" closes with the seducer's six survivors—the castoffs, the cuckolded, the bereaved—sweetly singing their way back to normality, as they rejoice that the wicked always get their deserts, while "we, good people, will now gaily sing to you the old, old refrain." Along with the third Mozart-Da Ponte collaboration, "Così Fan Tutte" (1790), these operas all end with an insistence on reconciliation and unison that doesn't quite calm the centrifugal forces they have provoked. After all that has passed onstage, can we really feel that the not very happy Count and Countess will remain married in the *same* happy way as Figaro and Susanna? Likewise, in the voided afterworld of "Don Giovanni," what do we now consider "normal" desire—what can desire mean in a normal world? Giovanni is properly damned, but the gesture has always seemed, to me at least, theatrically mechanical, the residue of the popular morality tale from which the story was adapted. (The opera's original title was prefaced "Il dissoluto punito.")

Perhaps this failure of containment is endemic to all powerful narrative, whether comic or tragic: think of the weak orderly endings of "King Lear" and "Hamlet," or, for that matter, of the Book of Job. But opera differs from literary drama because music insists on living its own strange and independent life. Mackie writes astutely about how Mozart's operas yearn obsessively for forgiveness; he contends, more probingly, that the classical style itself fixates on forgiveness, that indeed "forgiveness is the secret ethical force at its heart." A music so invested in shapeliness and cadential return could probably do nothing else. But what happens when the music seems to go in the opposite direction of the drama? For instance, everyone feels that the songs in "Don Giovanni" are seductive, and that since music *is* seduction in this opera, Mozart's music offers, as Mackie says, "a disturbingly apt match for the seducer's." So, much as we might morally approve of the way that Donna Anna (assaulted and possibly raped) and Donna Elvira (seduced and abandoned) vengefully pursue Giovanni throughout the work, we can't fully identify with them, because, as Mackie says in an excellent formulation, "in effect they want to stop the opera"—to stop the seductions of the music.



Mackie is to be credited for daring the question: "Is Giovanni Mozart?" But he shies away from daring a deeper answer to his own deep question, in part because he doesn't address the particular and local textures of the music, wary perhaps of formalist criticism that would unreachably isolate the notes on the staves from the cultural analysis he does so well. But I like Jan Swafford's reminder, in his recent biography, that Mozart "thought deeply but in tones, felt mainly in tones, loved in tones, and steeped himself in the worlds he was creating with tones." If Mozart's music is as seductive as Giovanni (since Mozart's music is obviously Giovanni's), then it can't disapprove of itself. It's right to say that Anna and Elvira effectively want to end the opera, but musically, of course, they can only add more music to it.

"Figaro" and "Don Giovanni" seem to tell violently different stories (though Mozart entered the latter work in his catalogue simply as opera buffa), yet they sing a shared effervescence. One of my favorite arias in Mozart is Cherubino's joyous, bouncy song in "Figaro" ("Non so più cosa son"), in which he gives voice to the confusions of his adolescent desires: "Every woman makes me change color / Every woman makes me tremble." But Leporello's famous "catalogue" aria in "Don Giovanni," in which the servant lists his boss's conquests in various countries, landing twice on the refrain "in Spain, already one thousand and three," is no less joyous than Cherubino's. And these two arias are, in turn, no less beautiful than Donna Anna's painful song, in which she tells the tale of Giovanni's recent assault, "Or sai chi l'onore" ("Now you know who tried to steal my honor from me"). The words tell us that Anna sings a lament, while Cherubino and Leporello celebrate the distractions of desire. Yet I can't be the only auditor who responds to all three arias, which open with essentially the same harmonic progression, in broadly similar ways. Would a child, reacting only to the music, identify strongly different "moods" in the three solos?

W. H. Auden claimed that "there can be no tragic opera," because, even though the soprano may sing of being deserted and wanting to commit suicide, we are aware that both she and we are "having a wonderful time." Auden seems right to me, but genially flippant. It's not just that everyone is having too wonderful a time. It's that the music is having too wonderful a time. Which is to say that the music, sailing beyond judgment, beyond good and evil, is having too beautiful a time, a condition achingly inescapable in Mozart's sound world. That very grace can foil the finest performer, intent on erasing the effort involved in effortlessness: Curzon recorded Mozart's last concerto three times, and deemed the recordings unreleasable three times. For the listener, though, Mozart's music always sublimates sadness into its opposite. We smile in tears, something it has taken me a lifetime to learn. ♦

THE CURRENT CINEMA

SNIPPY

"You Hurt My Feelings" and "Master Gardener."

BY ANTHONY LANE

The new film from Nicole Holofcener is called "You Hurt My Feelings," but so what? That could be the title of *any* Holofcener movie. Less than five minutes into her first feature, "Walking and Talking" (1996), a therapist said to her patient, who was in conflict with his wife, "Why do you think she's always hurting your feelings?" Since then, audiences have been treated to "Lovely & Amazing" (2001), "Friends with Money" (2006), "Please Give" (2010), and "Enough Said" (2013)—all of them written and directed by Holofcener, and none of them unmarked by emotional dents and dings.

At the heart of "You Hurt My Feelings" are Beth (Julia Louis-Dreyfus) and her husband, Don (Tobias Menzies). She is a writer, he is a shrink, and they live in New York—how crazy is that? I mean, where do filmmakers come *up* with these ideas? Beth and Don have a son, Eliot (Owen Teague), in his early twenties, who is a sniper in the Marine Corps, with eleven kills under his belt. Correction: he is toiling in a weed store and writing a play. Also in the picture are Beth's sister, Sarah (Michaela Watkins), who supplies interior décor to the unappeasable rich, and her husband, Mark (Arian Moayed), an actor. And here's the kicker: these people aren't very good at what they do, but few of them are candid enough to admit it.

Don, for example, worries that he's losing his touch. And he's right to fret. We drop in on his therapy sessions, where he sits in a state of near-numbness, offering either bland advice or none at all. One patient, Jim (Zach Cherry), mutters "He's an idiot" at the end of an appointment, and a couple named Carolyn (Amber Tamblyn) and Jonathan (David Cross), who can be sure of a medal if bickering ever becomes an Olympic sport, wind up asking Don for their money back. (Tamblyn and Cross are married in real life, doubtless dwelling in perfect harmony.) There's a nice irony humming in the background: before Menzies played Don, he was the Duke of Edinburgh in "The Crown," and you keep waiting for him to spice up Don's efforts as a shrink with a dash of Prince Philip—"For God's sake, take your bloody heads out of your backsides and stop moaning."



Tobias Menzies and Julia Louis-Dreyfus star in Nicole Holofcener's film.

The crunch comes when Beth, who has written her first novel, overhears Don say that he doesn't like it. And that's it. That is the imperishable horror on which the movie turns. Beth, certainly, can imagine nothing worse. She reacts as if Don had been charged with genocide by the International Criminal Court. "I think I'm gonna be sick," she says, declaring that she'll no longer be able to look him in the face. Finally, she confronts him in the street and just about manages to gasp the words "It's my w-w-work."

Delusions of creativity are always funny, because they rely on such a spectacular lack of self-knowledge. Is there a cure, apart from a steady job in a laundromat or a slaughterhouse? If I bumped into Beth, I'd give her a copy of Francis Bacon's conversations with the art critic David Sylvester, in which Bacon says, "It's very pleasant to be praised, but it doesn't actually help you." He claims that the most useful criticism is the destructive kind, adding that, to his regret, he can't practice such destruction on the work of friends. Sylvester asks, "Do you find that you can criticize their personalities and keep them as friends?" and Bacon replies, "It's easier, because people are less vain of their personalities than they are of their work."

One twist, in the tale of Beth's vanity, is that she's played by Louis-Dreyfus. You therefore automatically think, Well, this setup might possibly furnish a single episode of "Seinfeld." Whether it's enough to sustain a whole movie is another matter. Holofcener's solution is to spread the vulnerability around—to suggest that most of her characters suffer from a Beth-like itch for reassurance, inflamed into a rash of self-pity. "I look tired. I'm aging," Don remarks, staring into a mirror. Mark, fired from a role in a play, says, "I'm tired of wanting validation and never getting it." Eliot complains of being ignored, because his parents (until this recent crisis, at least) love each other so much. Bummer. The implication is not simply that our feelings get hurt but that they exist in *order* to be hurt, and that the folks around us should bathe and bandage the wounds.

Given this mockable array, Holofcener goes surprisingly easy on her troupe

 ILLUSTRATION BY ANNA PARINI

of fools. Could it be that, over the years, her approach to the hypersensitive has lost a pinch of sourness and grown more sympathetic? What doesn't vary is the size of her chosen world, and "You Hurt My Feelings," true to form, hunkers down inside a tiny subset of society. Engagement with troubles outside the stockade, as it were, is confined to brief and maladroit lunges at charity—a running gag in "Please Give" and again here, as Beth and Sarah dole out secondhand clothes at an open-air stall, the aim being to cosset their consciences ("It's really great to give back") while vaguely succoring the needy. As any reader of Jane Austen will argue, a small dramatic arena is no handicap, and it can become the stage for the most expansive passions. I confess, however, that there were moments in this new film when I prayed for Beth, Don, and the gang to be harried down Madison Avenue by cybernetic pterosaurs firing Sidewinder missiles tipped with alien venom. Alternatively, you could invite them all to spend a week in Wyoming. But that would be science fiction.

As career moves go, the path from neo-Nazism to horticulture has not, perhaps, received the attention it deserves. That strange omission is rectified by "Master Gardener," the new movie from Paul Schrader. It stars Joel Edgerton as Narvel Roth, who manages the formal gardens at the Gracewood estate. It's a grand if melancholic place, owned by Norma Haverhill (Sigourney Weaver), whose name is like a mashup of Norma Desmond and Miss Havisham, and whose gaze could nip the buds off a damask rose at forty yards.

What Norma knows, and what it takes us a while to learn, is that Narvel, complaisant and taciturn, with an immaculate side part, hasn't always been so well mannered. When he removes his shirt, we see the double lightning bolt of the S.S., a skull and crossbones, and the legend "White Pride" tattooed across his shoulder blades. Gradually, flashbacks fill us in: Narvel was once a shaggy foot soldier of the ultra-right, who committed murder for the cause, and snitched on his brothers-in-arms for the sake of a new identity and a fresh life. In short, he has, in accordance with the Book of Isaiah, beaten his spears into pruning hooks—or, at any rate, traded his handgun for a pair of pruning shears. Not that his old skills have been left to rust. "I'm a gardener," he says, squaring up to a couple of no-good punks and brandishing the shears. "Done a *lot* of pruning." If you don't want to be deadheaded, stay clear.

Will audiences buy the conceit of this misfit, the way that they bought the idea of the minister, in Schrader's "First Reformed" (2017), who was so riled by the fate of the Earth that he donned an explosive vest? Hard to say. Narvel, alone in his room, sits and writes in a journal just as the minister did. (If you want to qualify as a Schrader hero, transcribing and reciting your innermost thoughts is pretty much de rigueur.) "Gardening is a belief in the future," he proposes, foreseeing that "change will come," yet the manner of the transformation is weirdly withered and dry. To and fro the characters come and go, with a slightly stunned air, weighing their lines of dialogue before they speak. Schrader has always been drawn to reticence—think of Richard Gere and his sly smile in "American Gigolo" (1980)—but the exciting sense of a soul under pressure makes way, in Narvel's case, for the merely glum.

Violence, of course, is preparing to flower. Such is the rule in Schrader's field of vision. What leads to the outburst, in "Master Gardener," is the arrival at Gracewood of Norma's grandniece, Maya (Quintessa Swindell). She is, as Norma announces with relish, of "mixed blood." Narvel's duty is to take Maya on as an apprentice—"There are, in fact, thirty-eight different kinds of hoes," he tells her, sincerely hoping not to be misheard—and his destiny is to fall in love, and, in the process, to find redemption for his sins. Again, though, there's a curious want of urgency; the link between the lovers seems more willed than instinctive, let alone lit with any fervor. It's almost as if the movie were following the blueprint of a moral scheme, like the layout of a herbaceous border, and plausibility be damned.

One thing I do believe in is the power of Sigourney Weaver. She makes Norma authentically scary, investing every gesture with the fierce languor of entitlement. Norma demands—not requests—sexual favors from Narvel, her dark eyes drinking in his bodily insignia, and as she holds out her wineglass for a refill, at lunch, with a butler standing by, you suspect that she'd be quite happy to step back two hundred years, and out into gardens tended by the enslaved. "Here we are, in the muck of the past," she says, referring to her family history. But muck is the rich soil from which she blooms. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Kaamran Hafeez, must be received by Sunday, May 28th. The finalists in the May 15th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the June 12th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ”

THE FINALISTS



“I'll take the jacket and the pants and the pants.”
Yael Nobel, New York City

“I want a tie that will really get me noticed.”
C. R. Pandolfi, Los Angeles, Calif.

“Part of me loves it.”
Carol Lasky, Boston, Mass.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“I couldn't help but notice you from across the room.”
Devin Cortez, Phoenix, Ariz.



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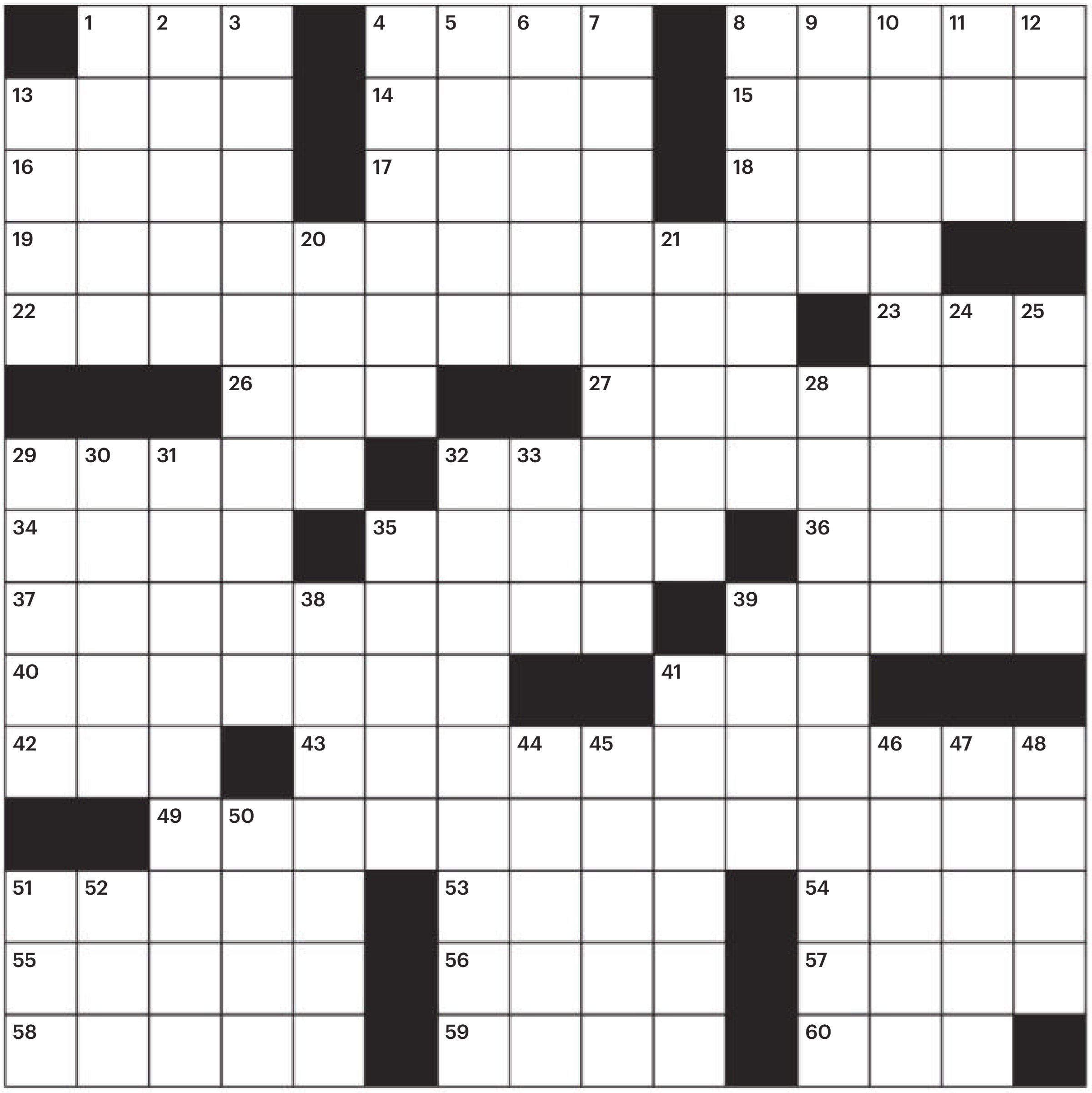
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PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A lightly challenging puzzle.

BY WILL NEDIGER



ACROSS

1 "That's rich!"
4 Bearers of gold, frankincense, and myrrh
8 Cried like a crow
13 "*¿Qué* ___?"
14 Mayor Adams who wrote the plant-based-life-style book "Healthy at Last"
15 Sound eliciting a "Gesundheit!"
16 Food-thickening agent
17 Old Germanic letter
18 Create a hard copy of
19 Friends who are in close contact?
22 Carefully disentangles
23 Burst
26 Insect aptly hidden in the Marvel movie subtitle "Quantumania"
27 Tidies
29 "Cosmicomics" author Calvino
32 Nearby region
34 "Done!"
35 Brought to the impound lot
36 Didn't let go of
37 Collapse theatrically
39 Companies
40 "Tartuffe" playwright
41 Hair style that might be deliberately messy
42 Tolkien creature that resembles a 56-Across
43 Quaint dismissal to a child
49 Extremely famous person
51 Substack publications
53 Alphabetize, say
54 ___ Office
55 Brand known for its pore strips
56 Support for a rope swing
57 "I ___ to agree" ("That's my general viewpoint, too")
58 Formally relinquished
59 Stuff that Anakin Skywalker doesn't like because it's "coarse and rough and irritating"
60 Two-time Super Bowl M.V.P. Manning

DOWN

1 The ___ (city that's home to Huis ten Bosch Palace)
2 Word often seen after "carne" on menus
3 Firm counter offer?
4 Least perceptible
5 One of the Caribbean's A.B.C. islands
6 Manufacture, as controversy
7 Athlete with cool moves?
8 It "has acquired the occult ability to add value to itself," per Karl Marx
9 One of six hundred and forty in a square mile
10 "Ghost ___" (TV series starring Jennifer Love Hewitt)
11 Really, really long time
12 .
13 "If we're still single by the time we're forty, let's get married," e.g.
20 "Tonight Show" host after Carson
21 Anticipate with trepidation
24 1300 hours
25 Some College Board exams
28 Paying close attention
29 "Who's there?" response
30 Claw for snatching fish
31 When you're in the majority?
32 Couples' hideaways
33 Have bills to pay
35 Doughnut-like mathematical surface
38 Pored over
39 Support on Kickstarter, say
41 Left in a hurry
44 Now, in Spanish
45 Actress Sophia who won David di Donatello awards sixty-two years apart
46 Innie or outie
47 Yemeni's neighbor
48 Form a metalworking union?
50 Fairy-tale monster
51 "Strictly Come Dancing" airer
52 Statement rated "Pants on Fire" by PolitiFact, e.g.

Solution to the previous puzzle:

T	W	O	■	■	F	A	U	L	T	■	■	T	S	P
H	A	N	D	■	A	D	M	I	N	■	■	A	K	A
I	N	E	E	D	A	H	I	N	T	■	S	K	I	T
S	T	A	T	E	■	O	C	T	■	D	U	E	L	S
■	S	C	R	A	T	C	H	■	D	O	N	A	L	D
■	■	T	I	T	O	■	■	P	E	R	■	H	E	R
■	■	■	T	H	E	C	A	U	C	A	S	I	T	Y
■	H	O	U	S	T	O	N	C	O	M	E	T	S	■
Y	O	U	S	T	A	R	T	E	D	I	T	■	■	■
E	M	T	■	A	P	E	■	■	E	L	I	M	■	■
S	E	D	E	R	S	■	U	P	D	A	T	E	S	■
I	M	A	G	E	■	G	N	U	■	J	O	L	T	S
T	A	N	G	■	B	O	T	T	L	E	F	L	I	P
I	D	C	■	■	U	N	I	T	Y	■	F	O	R	E
S	E	E	■	■	G	E	E	S	E	■	■	W	S	W

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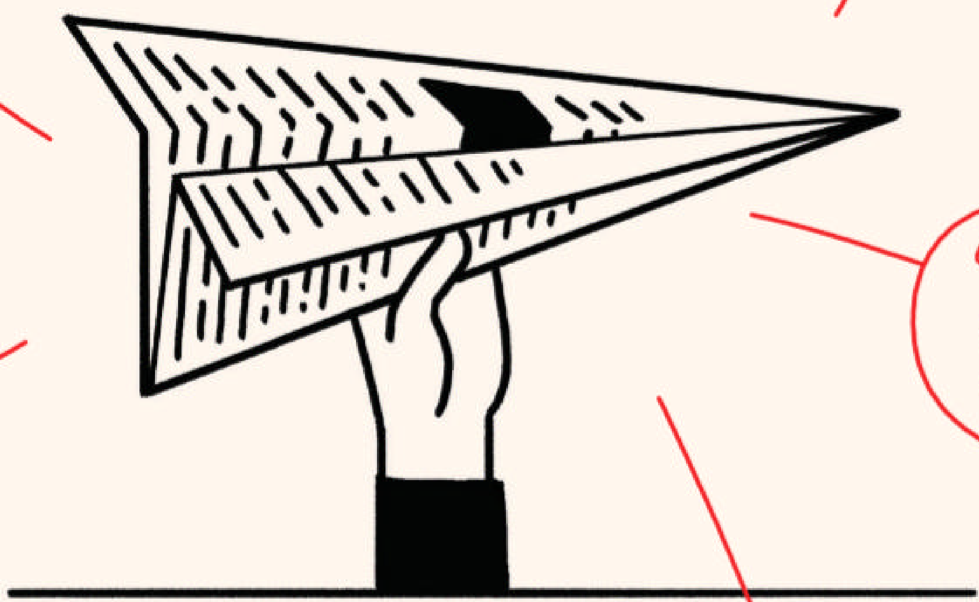
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